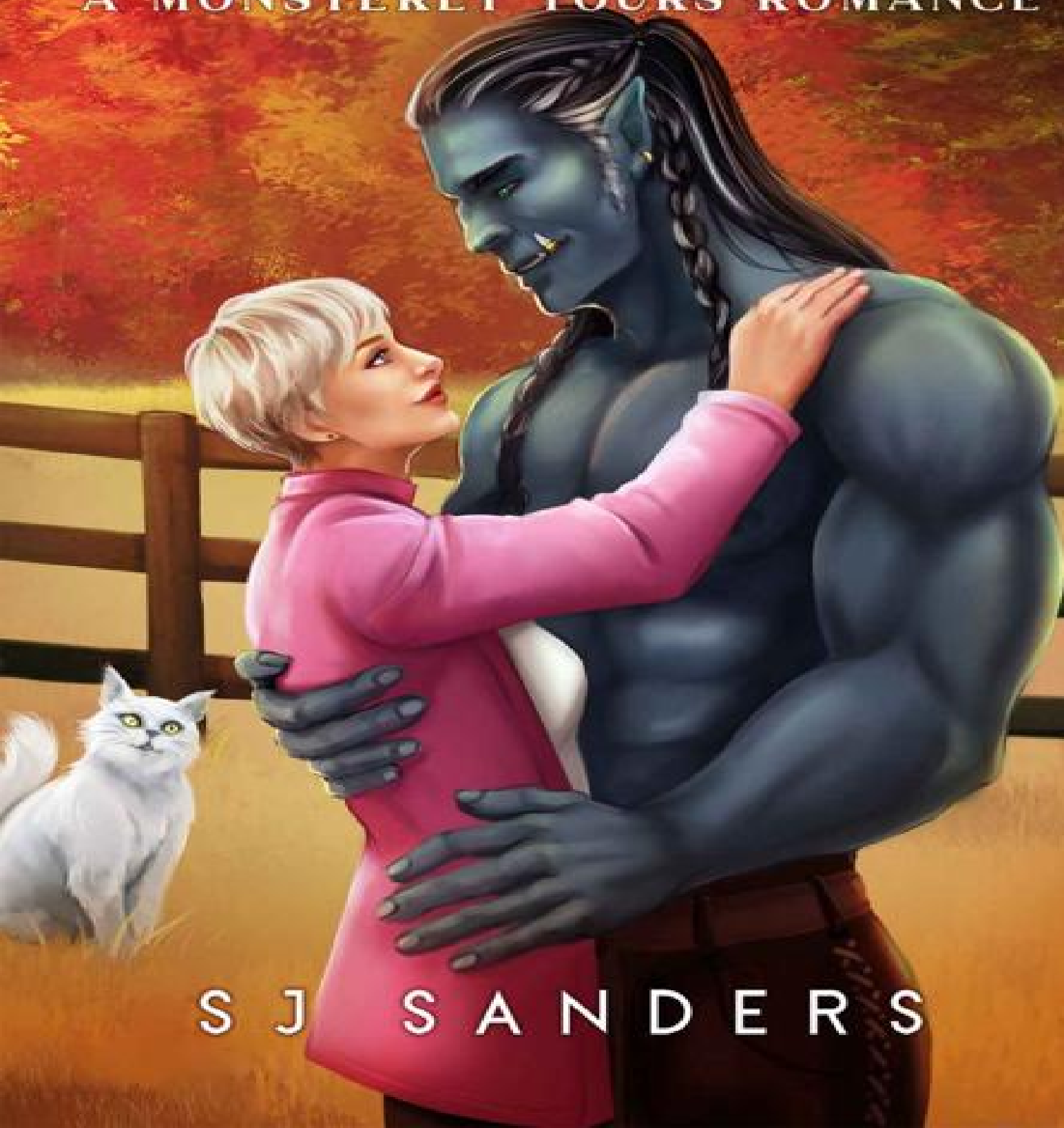


A HARVEST FESTIVAL TO REMEMBER...AND A PERFECT FALL INTO LOVE

HOW TO CLAIM A HUMAN MATE

A MONSTERLY YOURS ROMANCE



S J SANDERS

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S.J. SANDERS

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PROLOGUE



LYNN

I don't know if I hate my life, but I do know that I hate one significant person in it. My husband, Andrew. I detest him with every breath in my lungs as I watch him stand smugly in front of me, puffing on his expensive cigars that *my* late father's money provided for him. Andrew Bickner is the image of poise and elegance, so the sneer on his face just makes me all the more inclined to drown him in muddy water or something equally filthy.

"What do you want, Andrew?" I ask wearily, sick of his games.

"I think you know exactly what I want," he snaps, combing a hand through his perfectly coiffed hair.

I can see a few strands of gray that his recent dye job missed, but I don't point it out. He's obsessed with maintaining the illusion of youth and mentioning his stray grays will only distract from the matter at hand. Instead, I eye him as I scoop out a little bite of mint gelato and slide it over my tongue with a silent moan of pleasure. Said pleasures have been few lately and I want nothing more than to scoop huge, drippy spoonfuls of the dessert into my mouth.

In fact, fuck gelato—I want the mint chocolate chip ice cream I enjoyed during my childhood. Ice cream that puddled in the corners of a waffle cone as I hurried to eat it before it melted into a sloppy mess. I sigh longingly. I haven't had a cone in years, not since I was twelve and my mother took a stricter interest as she began to groom me for the future that she saw for me.

I grimace down at the tiny portion of gelato. After years of being the wife of a hotshot lawyer for an international corporation, I'm tired of having to be at the peak of perfection in every way. Tired of not being able to enjoy life just to maintain appearances. Above all, I'm far too tired for this conversation with Andrew.

"I'm sorry, Andrew, you're going to have to break it down for me. What, exactly, is the problem?" I arch a thin, pale brow at him as I take another bite of my dessert.

“A divorce, Lynn. I mean, fuck, just look at you! You’ve put on weight, and you don’t even bother to dye your hair anymore. I’m embarrassed to even be seen in public with you.” Andrew pushes a hand through his blonde hair again.

I gape at him. “I went from a size six to a size twelve. My doctor says that my weight is fine.”

He shakes his head. “I’m trying to get into politics. The image I craft now is going to be the catalyst for the next step in my life. I need a regal, dignified woman at my side. A Jackie Kennedy, if you will, and you’re just not it anymore. Not with the way you’ve let yourself go.”

I regard him coolly as I take his measure, studying his hand and his flustered face. I may have “let myself go,” but it’s a damn sight better than what he’s done to himself in my opinion. He’s been overdoing it with the fake tan again. It looks almost unnatural against his blue eyes and fairer patches of skin where the spray couldn’t quite reach. Honestly, if anyone is embarrassed to be seen out in public together, it should be me. In his attempt to escape the mortal condition, he looks ridiculous.

Sure, my hips have a bit more padding than they did a couple of years ago, and I have more ass and thicker thighs. There are also a few fine wrinkles now at the corners of my eyes that he’s been on me to Botox away, although gods only know how they got there since I haven’t had much to smile about in forever. None of it hardly seems to warrant the disgust with which he is regarding me. I’m perfectly groomed as always and wearing the most fashionable, immaculate clothing that money can buy when I would much rather be wearing something loose and comfortable.

“I see. And this is the excuse you’re going for,” I drawl with a hint of amusement as I point my spoon in his direction.

His face flushes. “I *need* to be seen with a woman who has sex appeal and class, and you aren’t even trying. You just look... old.”

My laughter bursts out of me, surprising even me. “For fuck’s sake, Andrew, I’m hardly the Crypt Keeper here. But if that’s what will help you sleep better at night then it’s fine with me. Frankly, I’m quite done with you and all of this,” I say, gesturing around at the lavish apartment that Andrew insisted on having decorated in shades of ivory and cream.

I never understood why he chose that color scheme. It’s magazine perfect to be sure, especially with the hints of blue and gold in some of the

decor, but it makes me terrified to live there even though my inheritance paid for most of it, just as it put him through law school and has paid for most of his little toys. I slowly set my bowl down and lace my fingers together over my lap.

“So now what? I presume there’s still something of my inheritance left for me to fall back on.”

He shrugs. “A little. Roughly two hundred thousand—or a little less. Enough to get by for a couple of years or more if you’re careful. As you know, we sold off your inherited shares of your father’s corporation years ago. They went a long way giving you the life you wanted.”

“You mean the life you insisted on, including attending that Ivy League law school,” I remind him. “I didn’t want to sell my shares in the company my daddy worked his whole life building. You insisted we needed the money. I never wanted this sort of lifestyle, and you know it.”

He straightens his cuffs and sighs. “It’s necessary. That is something you never understood, Lynn. All of this,” he gestures to the apartment and our clothes, “is necessary for building the sort of image that helps you get ahead in the world. And that takes money, poise, and dedication. But since you hate it all so much, I’m sure that you’ll be fine with your remaining inheritance.”

I raise an eyebrow and snort at his ill attempt at levity.

“I may not want to live in a magazine ad, but this is ridiculous, Andrew. You’re leaving me with practically nothing outside of the pittance that’s left of my inheritance.”

He shakes his head and gives me a smile. “Take that up with your lawyer, if you can afford one. Fair warning, though, I can tell you that any efforts will be unsuccessful. You did sign a prenup after all. I’m not required to give you anything.” Adjusting his cufflinks, his smile turns mocking. “Don’t worry, dear. You’ll hand on your feet, and who knows? Maybe you can even turn that pitiful little café that your mom loved into something profitable with all the available time you will now have.”

“Yeah, maybe I will,” I agree, my eyes narrowing at his mocking tone.

That I feel an icy prickle of dread, I keep to myself. I’ve seen the reports on the café, and it’s come close to toeing the line of going in the red so many times over the years. It makes a profit, so Andrew hasn’t insisted that we sell it, but not much. I could sink a chunk of what money I have left into it or try to look for a more profitable spot. I always loved

spending my afternoons as a teen helping my mom in her café, and the idea of going back to the business is unexpectedly appealing.

He strides by me and picks up a suitcase I didn't even see packed and sitting just outside in the foyer. He doesn't even spare me a glance until he fetches his coat, draping it casually over his arm. Only then does he look up at me, his expression wooden.

"My lawyers will be in touch in the morning with the papers." He glances around the apartment. "Since the apartment is in my name, and we both know you can't afford to take over the payments, I'll expect you to be out by the end of the week. In the meantime, any calls for me can be forwarded to the Hilton."

"Sure," I reply, as if I have any intention of passing that message along.

Fuck him and his cronies.

I don't bother standing much less walking him to the door, as he leaves. The moment he's gone, I abandon the remains of the gelato as I stand to hunt out the whiskey. I feel like having something a bit stronger than dessert for celebrating.

CHAPTER 1



THREE YEARS LATER

LYNN

Tucking a lock of short blonde hair behind my ear, I look up from my accounting program and stare at my best friend.

"I'm sorry, we're doing *what* now?" I ask in disbelief, certain that I'm hearing things.

"Harvest festival, you and me," Kassie repeats, her blue eyes sparkling with humor as she stuffs a bite of an apple fritter into her mouth. Petite and somewhat curvy, my auburn-haired friend is the poster child for adorable. At seventh months pregnant, her adorableness has not only increased proportionally as she nibbles on everything in sight, but she also looks ready to pop. True to form, she gives me an excited smile. "Mom got me portal passes as a birthday present. Well, it was supposed to be for me and Jason, but he's busy. So you're the next victim on the list."

"Fabulous. What else is new? He's always busy," I mutter as I take another sip of my coffee.

Ah, coffee, the elixir of the gods.

I feel bad when her smile falls, but it returns before I have the chance to apologize. "Yeah, but at least this gives us some girl time. And who doesn't want to spend time at a harvest festival in a real orc village?"

I raise my hand. "Uh, me. This person right here. I mean, why orcs?" I grimace at the thought of a vacation surrounded by the brutish race. "Why not an elvish harvest festival?"

"Probably because they would never deign to invite a human to their kingdoms, not even for all the coffee beans in our realm," she teases.

She's got me there. Elves, while being the official spokespersons between the two worlds, aren't exactly friendly to humans. They consider *us* the brutish and uncivilized ones. Go figure.

"Come on, Lynn, it'll be fun. I promise. I've already put in for time off at work and Mom is going to have the kids. Don't make me go to this thing alone."

Her eyes widen pleadingly, and my lips quirk in spite of myself.

“And just how long were you planning on this adventure lasting?” I ask around another sip of coffee.

“A week.”

I groan softly and rub my forehead. “A week. I don’t know, Kassie. I am still trying to make the books balance and I need to look for a new venue for the café since clearly its location is no longer working for sales.”

She frowns at my screen, and I suppress the urge to hide it from her. Despite my best efforts, the last two months the café have been steadily declining.

“Are things that bad?” she asks quietly.

I sigh and muss my short hair. “Unfortunately, yes. Even trying to find a new location where there aren’t dozens of coffee shops already established in the same area is proving to be difficult. I might have to start looking out of state,” I admit. “I really don’t even know where to start with that.”

Kassie chews on her bottom lip for a moment but brightens. “Oh! What if you use this opportunity to scout business locations? I’ve heard of humans going cross-portal to start up new businesses. I doubt anyone over there has even heard of coffee.” She snaps her fingers. “I bet they would let us set up a vending booth in the mornings! We can get an idea for what sort of market there might be for you to set up a café in the mornings, and then we can have the rest of the day to explore and relax.”

I peer at her in surprise. I hadn’t even considered that option. From what I’ve read in recent publications, many entrepreneurs have been discovering the fae world to be ripe for expanding businesses as long as one can adapt to working around certain supply-side issues.

“That’s... not a bad idea. You wouldn’t mind if I set up my business across portal?”

She shrugs and gives me an unhappy, strained smile. “It’s not like we can see each other much now. We haven’t for years. And I know you’ve been stressed. If you end up getting a better opportunity there, then I’ll be happy for you. Besides, we can get magic mirrors and mirror each other every weekend if you decide to go for it. It also gives me an excuse to visit again in the future,” she adds with an attempt at a more genuine grin.

That smile is so hopeful, and there's something so sad behind her eyes that I pause. I really don't have time for a lengthy trip, even for business, but I recognize that look. It's the look of a woman trying to convince herself and the world that all is well while trying to hold onto some part of her life, some measure of happiness. I'll make time for her, and we can see if there is anything to her idea.

I lean back in my chair thoughtfully, my thumb rubbing back and forth across my lip. "The fact that electricity doesn't exist over there—meaning none of our machines and appliances will work—may be a problem. I can bring propane tanks with me to set up a temporary work area, but I would eventually need to speak with someone locally to make a plan for a more long-term solution that's compatible with the fae realms."

Kassie bounces very subtly on the balls of her feet, her expression eager. "Then you'll come?"

My lips quirk, and I can't resist returning her grin.

"Okay. It sounds like it might be fun, and who knows? It may be the opportunity I've been looking for."

Throwing her arms up in the air triumphantly, Kassie gives a triumphant whoop just before she encloses me in a squeezing hug that half-strangles me and makes me burst into laughter at the same time.

"You won't regret this!" she assures me. "We're going to have a blast sightseeing, tasting all the different foods... and I just know that everyone is going to love your coffee. Just you wait. This is going to be the getaway that we both need!"

"I'll consider myself fortunate if I get lucky and discover that He-Man orcs like espressos and finger sandwiches," I tease. "For now, I'm not going to pin my hopes on anything. This is just research and enjoying some downtime with my BFF."

"Sounds great to me," Kassie says, finishing with a sigh.

There seems to be a certain weight to that sound that makes my heart clench for her, but I'm trying not to infer. Regardless of whether this turns out profitable for me or not, I know that I've just made the right decision now. My best friend needs this—and me—right now. She deserves a little bit of happiness. Really, we both do. She may be right that we both need a bit of time to enjoy ourselves. I've put her on the back burner often enough when Andrew was scheduling my life; it's time for me to be there now to support her any way I can.

I wrap an arm around her shoulders and squeeze her close. “Besides, the idea of you going over there by yourself will likely give me nightmares,” I tease. “Knowing you, you’ll conquer the heart of some male, he will steal you away, and I would never see or hear from my best friend again. We can’t have that.”

Her smile surprisingly turns strained, but she shakes her head in denial and gives a weak chuckle. “Yeah, sure. Like anyone is going to find all *this* the answer to their dreams,” she snickers, gesturing to her ample pregnant belly.

“You never know. You’re pretty cute,” I drawl, pleased when I hear her snort a laugh.

She turns her head to peer up at me, her expression growing thoughtful. “Since the divorce... do you miss it? Having Andrew around?”

I choke on a laugh. “For what, exactly? Picking at the way I wear my hair, my dress, or the shape of my ass? I mean, even the sex wasn’t coming in on the regular. There wasn’t much left to miss by the time he left.”

My best friend falls silent and leans her head against my shoulder. I understand the unspoken questions she’s holding back—she’s wondering if this is going to be her future. I smooth her curly hair with one hand and hold her close. There will be time to worry about the future later. For now, we’re going to live in the moment.

“So... what should I pack for an orc harvest festival?” I say at length, to distract her. “Are we talking watching the autumn colors in upstate New York wear?”

“Maybe.” She giggles as she lifts her head. “From what I understand, their autumns are pretty chilly, but I bet you have plenty of great outfits that will work!” Kassie grabs my hand and drags me over toward my closet.

An hour later, I have clothes scattered everywhere and a suitcase packed with a weeks’ worth of seasonal outfits, plush sweaters, and slacks, and even a couple of wool skirts thrown into the mix, as well as the itinerary for our portal departure in hand.

Three days until we leave. Although I’m anxious about getting my cousin, Carolyn, to mind the café, I know that she will at least be eager to do it. Like me, she spent her weekends earning spending money at my mother’s café and has a lot of the same sentimental attachments to the place. She’s offered to buy me out before, albeit at a below-market price.

For the first time, I find myself considering the idea of doing just that if I find what I'm looking for across the portal.

CHAPTER 2



LYNN

My cheeks are chapped and almost icy from crossing the portal. I had never imagined that a quick trip through would be so cold. At my side, Kassie seems unaffected despite the fact that she rubs her gloved hands together, her cheeks bright pink as she looks expectantly at the orc who is greeting us.

Although I've seen a couple of orcs on the news quite a few years ago, they don't spend much time in our world for casual encounters with them to be common. For my first in-person orc experience, I can't decide if I'm impressed or terrified. The male in front of us is absolutely huge, a dull stone-gray color with sharp green eyes. He doesn't necessarily look friendly, his smile revealing far too many sharp teeth and a pair of wicked tusks, but when he speaks it is a manner that's surprisingly warm.

"Welcome to Obrul-tarin!" he bellows cheerfully. "I'm Kavar." He thumps his chest with a fist hard enough to make me jump the tiniest bit. "And I'll be assisting you in getting settled as guests of the Obrul clan. The harvest festival is a great celebration among our people, and we are delighted to have visitors for the occasion. While you're here, you will have the opportunity to enjoy time with our clan as well as the company of our visitors. Any questions before we begin?"

A teenager at the front of the group pops her hand into the air, catching his attention. He raises an eyebrow in inquiry.

"Are there going to be any elves around here?" she asks excitedly.

His expression sours, his lips puckering around his tusks in a manner that normally have suggested he just bit into a lemon. I hold back a laugh at his obvious distaste.

"No," he replies curtly. The girl's expression falls as her parents at either side of her pat her shoulder and back and whisper to her consolingly.

"Any other questions?"

A young man with a woman snuggled up beside him lifts a hand. "If not elves, what sort of visitors do you normally have? My girl and I really want the full experience."

The orc scratches his jaw and turns his head slightly as if thinking. It's only because of how close Kassie and I are standing that I can see his expressions clearly enough and hear his muttered observations.

"Orcs are not enough for the full experience of an orc festival in an orc village. Of course not," he mutters, and I find myself biting my tongue, my eyes watering with tears of mirth at his noticeable dismay.

I empathize with him. I can recall a number of times while I was paraded around at various functions and parties as nothing more than my husband's wife over the years that I was asked the most pointless drivel. Every time, it made me seriously question how intelligent they were or how little they actually valued my time and insights. I smile when he quickly manages to catch himself—a good save isn't always easy to pull off—and straightens as he looks over and grins at the couple. Naturally, they don't seem to notice that the expression is somewhat forced.

"As it happens, you will be happy to know that we do tend to get traders to our festival. Trolls and centaurs are common enough, a few local satyrs can sometimes be seen, and the occasional nymph. It varies from year to year. It's hard to say who will make the trip out to visit."

He shrugs apologetically. His eyes scan our group.

"Anything else before we move on? I'm sure you're eager to see where you'll be staying," he says, as he slaps his large hands against his cloth covered thighs.

I cast a hopeful look around, praying that no hands go up. I'm cold and a bit tired from the hectic morning as we rushed to the departure zone for the portal. If possible, the act of traveling between worlds has exhausted me. I don't know about anyone else, but I want to see where we'll be staying and maybe catch a nap. I'm pretty certain that Kassie could use the same, even if she's currently hopping in place like the Energizer Bunny. I just know that crash is coming right around the corner for her.

A man to my left shifts a bit in place and looks like he might be considering asking a question as he squints around. *Oh no*. Not a chance. He can save his question until *after* I'm settled under a cozy quilt—or whatever passes for the like here.

"I think we're good," I call out before anyone else can summon up another ridiculous question, giving the orc my most winning smile. "Lead on!"

A few of my fellow tourists shoot me a dark look, probably because they had been busy thinking up some doozy of a question, but I ignore them. I imagine the majority is thanking me even if they don't so much as look my way or acknowledge my suggestion as they huddle together in little clusters.

That's fine. I can take being glowered at for the team.

Our guide looks relieved and shoots me a grateful smile. The smile turns appreciative when his eyes linger on my wool and leather-clad figure. Moss green eyes glint as if he only now just realized I am there and glide over me in an appreciative manner that probably would have been an issue if he had kept at it any longer. There's a fine line between appreciating and ogling, and it's nice to see that there are males here who understand that when so many human men fail at it spectacularly. He gives me a nod and a wink before striding forward, his hand gesturing ahead of him.

"All right then. Come along. We've got visitor cottages ready near the square. It will be just a short walk to everything you might fancy. In each cottage, there will be an itinerary of events and activities that will be ongoing for the next week. Naturally, you're free to come and go through the village as you like. As you're our guests, you will find that our clan is a friendly sort."

"I wonder just how *friendly*," someone nearby mumbles with a snicker.

I don't catch who said it, but I'm pretty sure our guide heard them from the way his smile tightens. He confirms it when he replies over his shoulder.

"Friendly, but not to be toyed with for your amusement," he elaborates without looking over his shoulder.

I wish I knew who'd spoken just so I could get a look at their face now. I hold in a sigh and follow after, Kassie's arm tucked in mine as she attempts to look everywhere at once.

"This place is fantastic," she whispers, and I mumble an agreement.

The cottages are simple but clean, with a sort of natural elegance that you would expect to see touring the grounds of some historical estate. Even the keep rising over the village looks like a place I once visited when Andrew and I went to Europe on business. There's a sedate peace to everything that makes it very easy to see myself here, curled up in a chair with my cat, Casper, passing my evenings with a good book.

This whole thing is starting to look up, especially when we're dropped off at our cottage and I step inside to see the most inviting scene. Heavy quilts, though of a more utilitarian style than anything my grandmother ever made, are thrown over plush chairs, and a cheerful fire has been started up in the hearth awaiting our arrival. The decor is sparse, the stone walls clean and I believe even whitewashed to give it a lighter air. It's perfectly cozy.

Setting my suitcases on the floor, I stretch, my eyes following Kassie as she stares enthusiastically at our surroundings. She stretches her arms out, as if marveling at the sheer size of the space that is clearly built for orcs considerably larger than our species. Turning to me, her face lights up with a wide smile and she waves her hands toward herself.

"Come on, give it to me. Tell me what I want to hear. Say, 'Kassie, you were right, this place is perfect!'"

My laughter spills out of me. "Okay, you've got me. I have to give you major kudos on this one. This place really is great."

"This calls for cocoa!" she shouts, as she starts to hightail it over to the obviously designated cooking area at the rear of the cottage.

I make a face as I follow after her. "Cocoa is for winter," I object. "What about spiked hot cider?" I suggest, pointing to a large jug on the counter.

Her lips purse with curiosity. "Cider sounds pretty good too," she agrees as she uncorks it and takes a whiff. She smiles and glances back over at me.

"How did you know that this is a jug of cider?"

I shrug. "Lucky guess? It's a harvest festival, after all," I tease. "The apple harvest season probably just wound down in some parts."

Her eyebrows lift. "I didn't know you were interested in that sort of thing."

I wrinkle my nose as I join her and give the contents of the jug a sniff. A smile is surprised out of me by the rich, sweet aroma.

"I don't, really. But Andrew has a close friend who owns a piece of property in Vermont. He insisted we visit for several days every time the apple harvest came around. I've drunk more cider, eaten more apple butter, pies, and bread than I'd like to even think about. Sometimes I think I'm almost appled-out for this lifetime, but I do still enjoy a good cider," I say as I reach into a nearby cupboard and root out a large kiln-fired mug.

I set it on the counter beside me and pull another mug down for Kassie as she pours a bit of cider into a pot. It takes both of us working it to figure out how to operate the woodstove, but once we have it going and the burner open to heat the contents, I return to foraging.

A bottle of amber liquid sits on the top shelf of the cupboard, and I pull it down too. Some investigation reveals it to be a strong whiskey that makes my eyes water as I cough a bit.

“Looks like we’re in luck,” I say happily.

“You mean you are,” she corrects, her hand rubbing over her belly. “Regular cider is good enough for me. I’ll live vicariously through your experimentation with fae liquor.” She grins impishly, clearly eager to see me play the guinea pig.

I salute her with the bottle before setting it down beside the mugs. “Can’t be as bad as some of the stuff we got into back in the day.”

She breaks out into peals of laughter, her pregnant belly jiggling within the clutch of her arms from the force of it.

“Don’t make me laugh! You’re going to make me wet myself,” she gasps, wiping the streaming tears from her cheek as she snaps a hand towel at me with her opposite hand.

I dance out of the way, remaining at a safe distance until she pours the heated amber liquid into the mugs. She picks up one and carries it back to the main room, leaving me to doctor my cider how I see fit.

Some experimentations in our wild youth with moonshine had taught me to be cautious with unknown liquor, so I pour just a splash of the whiskey into the mug and give it a good stir before following behind her. Easing into a chair, I drag a quilt over me and take a long, sweet sip of my drink. The ripe, crisp, sweet, and tart flavors of the cider wash over my tongue, followed by the pleasant burn of the alcohol.

“Ahhh,” I sigh. “Now *this* is perfect.” I glance around casually. “All I’m missing is a smutty read and Casper curled on my lap.”

Kassie raises her mug to me. “To the perfect life, then.” She sighs contently, her eyes drifting over the cottage. “I can totally see you living someplace like this... but in the village, not shoved into a visitor’s cottage,” she chuckles. “All it would take is a trip back to pack your things and fetch Casper from Mom, and you’ll have everything you need. This place is totally you.”

“Yeah,” I murmur. “Remind me that I need to do something really nice to thank your mom for being willing to take Casper on in addition to your kids.”

“Pfft.” She waves a hand at me. “My mom loves animals of the small human and furred variety. I know she’s having a good time cuddling with all of them. Anything you do, she’s bound to love.”

I hum thoughtfully as I take another sip and turn to set my mug on the table beside me. There, I see the itinerary printed out in blocky English letters. As we were warned that few things in Ov’Gorg—as they call their world—would be legible to us since orcs spoke and wrote a different language, it’s clear that someone human had a hand in this.

I caress the thick paper between my fingers, feeling the slightly gritty texture of real parchment before reading over the carefully crafted list.

“Oh, look, there is a lunch trip out to the orchards,” I observe, pulling Kassie’s attention to it.

“What about hayrides? I haven’t done one of those since we were kids.”

I look over the list and shake my head. “No, but there is a pie eating contest. An evening fair. Music contests. Ax-throwing competitions, along with a bunch of other fighting and feats of strength, it looks like. A delfass race, whatever that is. And a bunch of other things I can’t really make out what they’re supposed to be. Something orcish, I guess.”

Kassie shrugs good-humoredly. “We’ll just do them all then. It will be an adventure.”

I raise my eyebrows. “All? Who exactly are you planning on entering into the pie eating contest?”

She grins. “Both of us, silly. It’s just for fun. Nothing says we have to win, and we get some tasty pie out of it.” She rubs her hand over her belly, and I’m pretty sure I see her salivate a little.

“Eh, why not?” I mutter, setting the list back down. “This is our vacation. We’ll do it all.”

I take another deep sip and thoughtfully eye my spare suitcase laden with coffee supplies. Hopefully, the coffee will be a success. If so, it will be the cherry on top of what’s turning out to be a perfectly relaxing vacation.

CHAPTER 3



I watch the tourists from the window of the keep's library, my nose twitching. I'm still not sure how I feel about opening our lands to human visitors. Sammi is convinced that it will be good for our community, and what's more, Orgath agrees with her. Since I trust my cousin and chieftain, there is little protest I can give against that.

It's not that I don't like humans. I find them delightful, especially the females. They all smell good and are so soft. Unfortunately, not one of them has called to me as a potential bloodbond, and I'm stingy enough to want to wait for the sort of mating that Orgath and Sammi have. A female may sigh with want over me, but if I can't give her a sniff and know that she's the one, then fate will simply have to be a cruel mistress.

Oh, I know it's not that simple. Although scent does tell us quite a bit about whether we are drawn to a potential mate. It's the whole package upon meeting. It's something I haven't been able to define, but I will know it when I experience it, even if it is taking a frustratingly long time. Even if I'm growing weary of this self-imposed chastity.

But it worked for Orgath, with him hidden away in his distant cottage far from our clan lands. He kept far from females and anyone at all when he found his bloodbond mate. After several years of carefree living hoping that I too might find my one, recent years have made me determined to follow his example if there is a chance that it proves to the gods I am worthy of a mate.

After five years dry, I'm just hoping that it ends up being sooner than later.

I know that an influx of humans, especially unmated ones, is good for our people. It gives more orcs an opportunity to find their bloodbond, since none of us are comfortable venturing into Ov'Ge.

Still... tourism? The concept is strange inside my head.

"I'm surprised to see you in here. I was certain that I would see you down there mingling among the humans."

My head turns to look over at Orgath standing just inside the room, his head cocked as a curious yellow gaze pierces me.

I snort. "And why is that?"

My cousin joins my side, his expression thoughtful. "You were down there almost every day when we opened the portal to the humans for the first time during the last harvest. And before that, any time there was a human near our territory, you were eager for word or to meet them yourself. What has changed?"

I lift a shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. "They will be here for a week. I'm sure they will be underfoot enough that I will eventually come across most of them."

"Bodi..." he rumbles, demanding a more honest answer.

I exhale loudly and grimace. "I don't wish to be disappointed again," I mutter. "Two males in our guard found their bloodbond mates last harvest, but I was not among them. Being charming and attentive to the humans did nothing to find my mate. It just made it more difficult to bear when the others found their females."

Orgath's eyebrow rises. "It seemed that you were enjoying attention from many females. It couldn't have been too disappointing."

"They were fun to tease," I admit. "But it is not the same as finding the one."

"No," my cousin sighs in agreement, and he rests a heavy hand on my shoulder. "It is not the same. But you will not find your female if you wallow in the keep, staring wistfully at the females who come through the portal gates."

"Are you asking me to entertain the humans?"

He shakes his head. "I'm only asking that you not spend the entire harvest festival holed up in this keep or your cottage, sulking because we have guests. Nothing is expected of you outside of your usual duties as the captain of the guard, but I hope that you will at least enjoy the festival."

I heave a sigh, but nod. Nothing in that is unreasonable, and it is a bit silly for me to hide in here just because I resent the high likelihood that my bloodbonded mate is not among our newest visitors. Maybe he is right. It may be best if I just enjoy the festival. It doesn't have to be any more complicated than that.

A tightness in my chest lightens, and I breathe deep, the tension in my body easing even as an eagerness to enjoy the festivities lights up.

At my silent agreement, he slaps my back and squints down at the humans milling about the square. The vendors set up early that morning,

and business has been steady as orcs and neighboring fae thread through the market. It is so large this year that it overflows the square, and I find myself suddenly very interested in exploring the riot of colors from the chaos pressed in everywhere my eyes land. That chaos only seems to heighten with the arrival of our Ov'Ge tourists, as merchants vie to attract customers.

“Kavar have any problems with the humans?”

I shake my head. “He seemed to get them moving pretty quickly this time. I suspect he will be back at the keep at any moment.”

Orgath grunts. “It didn’t take them long to venture out into the market. Good. The quicker we can get them to their cottages, the sooner they are spending coin in the village. With them here for such a short span, it’s better not to lose a day.”

I nod in agreement. Our first attempt last harvest was a nightmare. The humans were difficult to get moving and had endless questions. By the time everyone was settled, it was late in the day and the humans were more interested in settling down for the evening and eating than enjoying the fair and festivities. This definitely seems like a positive step forward. I am curious how Kavar managed to pull it off, however. From my position, no one had seemed especially eager to move away from the portal. And then the next minute they were following after him.

“Is your mate still planning on going around this evening to each of the cottages to officially welcome our visitors?” I ask, curious.

Orgath snorts and cuts me an impatient look. “What do you think?”

I shake my head. “Why not just have the humans all meet in the audience chamber here at the keep and get it all done at once?”

“Not personal enough,” he grumbles, his scowl deepening.

It’s clear that this is an argument he has had with our Lady more than once. It still baffles me as to why she would even want to spend her evening stretching out short visits between no less than twenty filled cottages. Sure, they are close to one another due to diligent planning before construction when our chieftain and lady first started to entertain ideas of entertaining humans among us a few times a year, but even with ten to fifteen minutes per cottage, it is hours of needless—not to mention thankless—work.

My confusion must be apparent because my cousin grimaces, his nose wrinkling.

“She enjoys it,” he says, his expression pained. “She likes meeting the humans coming in and seeing what brings them here. And she believes that it starts their experiences here on a positive foot by having her there as a reassuring presence.”

I grin at my cousin. “It sounds like you’ve memorized a lecture from your mate.”

Orgath’s mouth tightens as his expression darkens. “Don’t make me forget our shared blood or else I may follow through with my urge to strangle you,” he growls.

My grin widens with amusement. Orgath has threatened to harm me one way or another since we were orclings sparring. Anyone else might see it as a threat, but for his kin, it’s his love language in response to our teasing.

He cranes his neck, looking at the window behind me and grunts again before turning abruptly to stalk toward the door. “Kaval has returned. We will meet him in the briefing chambers. I wish to hear his observations regarding our human guests.”

My eyebrows rise, but I trail after him, holding back a grin. “As pertaining to security in a manner that befits a highly suspicious orc, or in regards to improving our tourism?” I tease.

In the back of my mind, I’m still trying and failing to reconcile our natural tendencies with Sammi’s plans. Although we are hospitable to guests, orcs typically aren’t terribly trusting of outsiders nor are we what most species consider “friendly.” This tourism plan hinges entirely on our hospitality and a hope that the humans aren’t put off by our gruff manner. The success of that last year was doubtful at best, but it must not have been too bad if we have visitors coming again this year.

I am not entirely surprised then that Orgath smirks at me over his shoulder and shrugs. “Both,” he replies.

By the time we arrive on the floor level, Kaval steps inside. His expression is relaxed as he gives Orgath a deferential nod and clasps my arm in greeting before the three of us head into the briefing room accessed through a rear door just behind the large audience chamber. I settle comfortably in a chair and lean forward, resting my elbows on the large table between us as I regard the guard. At my side, Orgath reclines gracefully in his own seat, his gaze boring into the male.

“Report.”

Kaval tips his head in a short nod. "Of course, Chieftain. The humans arrived without incident. I couldn't see any that warrant any special attention. The lot of them were pretty harmless. In fact, most of their curiosity seemed to be about the festival itself rather than us or our village."

The last is said with a reluctant, exasperated amusement that I can well understand. Every now and then, we get a handful who are genuinely interested in orc culture, and at times it has warranted caution on our part when it has seemed excessively curious. For the most part, our tourists seem to come for the opportunity to experience Ov'Gorg in general since few species are willing to open their borders to human visitors. The trolls have been considering allowing humans to visit during the midsummer, but they have yet to do so. The result is that, for now, the humans don't have many options for visits.

Orgath scratches a claw in his beard and nods approvingly. "No one gave you any problems?"

"No," Kaval replies with a satisfied smile. He chuckles. "I had a moment there where I was worried that it was going to be a repeat of last year, but thankfully one of the females interceded and we were able to get moving. It was unfortunate that her cottage was one of the first. I wouldn't have minded enjoying her company a little longer."

The admiration in his voice sparks my curiosity, but Orgath doesn't care about the details of a single human who is not identified as a possible risk to the clan. Before long, the conversation turns to matters of security and keeping our human guests both safe and entertained during their stay and I think nothing more of it. It is only after we get plans settled for tomorrow that I haul myself down to the stables and saddle my delfass Haith, eager to return home.

His rumbling purr greets me, his tail whipping at me as he patiently waits for me to ready him. Though I'm tired, there is a new excitement stirring within me as I give Haith full freedom to run and enjoy the ride to my cottage, my mind returning to the humans and the joys of the festival ahead of me.

CHAPTER 4



LYNN

I wake with a shiver. The morning air is brisk, chilling my nose peeking over the edge of my quilt. Groaning, I kick back the blanket and roll out of bed. As much as I would like to wallow in my blanket cocoon as I normally would on vacation, I have to remind myself that this first morning will be to scope out the area to determine the best place to set up and then go about securing appropriate permission to test my coffees.

No problem. It's not as if this is the most intimidating thing I've ever done.

I'm lying to myself, of course. Schmoozing with clients is something I have plenty of experience with, but finagling a new business plan, especially with beings who aren't even human, is something else entirely. Getting here and all the planning it took was fun, but now that the day has arrived, I almost feel sick.

Coffee. I need coffee.

Rolling up so that I'm sitting up on the side of the bed, I shove my feet into my slippers and make my way down from the loft. Downstairs, I can hear Kassie stirring. She'd been reluctant to take the larger room, but I had insisted. Hearing her groan with the effort to get out of bed, I'm glad I did. She certainly doesn't need to be climbing up and down these stairs on top of dealing with all the other discomforts that come with being pregnant.

I'm annoyed all over again that her husband blew her off. This should have been a romantic trip for them, snuggling up in a cozy cottage and enjoying the pleasures that could be found in the village later in the day. I'm not entirely surprised, since my relationship with Andrew has had the unfortunate side-effect of souring me on men and relationships in general. Still, I do feel bad that she's humoring me by turning this into a business trip in a desperate bid to get me to come along. Because of that, she's sacrificing lazy mornings in bed to go to the market with me.

Yawning, I strike up the oven and in no time have it hot enough to set the coffee pot on, glad that I spent a little time trying to make a decent cup of coffee without the usual equipment in the café back home. Before long,

the intense aroma of dark roast coffee fills the cottage just as Kassie makes an appearance.

She's disgustingly bright-eyed for this hour and is even dressed and her hair brushed while I grimly pour a cup in my pajama pants as I try to blink the grit from my eyes. In comparison, I look shabby. I'm wearing a loose Hello Kitty T-shirt and an old, worn pair of pink bunny slippers that I've had since my dorm days in college despite the loathing Andrew had for them.

Of course, his hate-on for them is probably why they became a regular part of my wardrobe in recent years. Now, they represent freedom and that part of myself that I had lost, now reclaimed. It has also inspired my newest criteria before I ever allow myself to get all starry eyed over a man again. If he can't love me for my bunny slippers, then he's not the one for me.

Kassie takes a long look at me, her smile widening as I meet her gaze over the rim of my cup.

"I have to say, this look kinda takes me by surprise." She chuckles.

My lips curve as I take a sip. "It should be more of a flashback since I believe I wore this sort of thing regularly when we shared a dorm room," I tease. "I practically lived in my pajamas if I didn't have to attend class. In fact, the old floppers here are survivors from that period," I point out, lifting up a foot to wiggle the floppy ears of my slipper at her.

Kassie's hand cups over her mouth, stifling a giggle, her eyes crinkling with merriment. "I can't believe I forgot that. You did!" She drops her hand, her grin wide. "Well, I have to say that it's good to see." Her eyes skim over me and she shakes her head, her smile widening further. "You look so poised and untouchable during the day, so much so that I'm sometimes afraid to hug you less I risk rumpling you. I like this you," she admits.

I look at her thoughtfully, my eyebrows very slightly arched. I hadn't given it much thought. Not even when I was packing. It was almost mechanical as I went through the suits and jewelry in my wardrobe. I can't even remember picking any of it out, or even when it was bought, since Andrew had hired someone to select and purchase the most flattering and stylish fashions.

Had I become so divorced from my preferences that I project that cultivated image of what my husband wanted me to be rather than just

being myself and wearing the things I enjoyed? The thought is a depressing one, and it follows me back up to the loft a short time later as I look over the clothes hanging in the old-fashioned bureau standing across from the bed. Everything is some shade of muted browns. Hues ranging from chocolate to fawn, champagne alongside ivory and cream-colored blouses. Classic, and classy as Andrew was fond of saying.

In a word, boring.

How did this even happen? Not only is my wardrobe full of brown, but there's no trace of my favorite colors. There is no pink at all, unless one could count the pearl barely pink blouse tucked in among the others, and the only bit of blue that I can see is a formal-looking navy pant and jacket set hanging at one of the far ends.

Sighing, I pull out one of the blouses and a champagne sweater, as well as one of the several pairs of khaki slacks, and lay them on the bed. As I strip off my bedclothes and put the ensemble on, I make a mental note to do some actual clothes shopping for myself. With my business preparing to fail, shopping has been the furthest thing from my mind, but perhaps that was a mistake. I haven't given myself an opportunity to really reclaim myself and my power over my life, and clothing is the most basic self-expression that exists. It's beyond time to remedy that.

Tucking my feet into a pair of dark brown loafers, I hurry back down the stairs. To my surprise, Kassie is already ready to go, her rust-colored wool coat barely buttoned up over her belly, showing off hints of the cheerful cranberry red sweater she's wearing beneath it. I pull on my light sheepskin coat and frown. My clothes are expensive, but I feel dowdy and plain next to her. It makes me feel even more out of place in my own skin.

She promptly hands me an insulated travel mug, and I accept it with a grateful smile.

"Bless you."

"I figured you would need it," she giggles, walking over to the door.

I nod and tuck it close to my body, relishing the heat coming off the cup. "How do you feel about doing some shopping after we get the information we need?" I ask casually.

Her eyes widen slightly, but the smile that stretches over her face sweeps me up in her enthusiasm.

"I say, heck to the yeah! After traumatizing ourselves to get the permission you require, I think some retail therapy will be exactly what

we need.”

A snort of laughter escapes me as I open the door, glancing over at her fondly. “Traumatizing?”

She gives me a curt nod as we step outside, but her lips curve in amusement. “Well, you’ll be the one traumatized, not me. I’m just here for emotional support. But yeah... having to actually talk to someone in charge... maybe even the chieftain...” She trails off with a shudder.

Standing just outside of our cottage, the wind tugging at our hair, I’m sure it is perfectly idyllic, but I don’t notice. I’m too busy gaping at her to pay any attention to our scenic surroundings.

“Kassie, don’t say shit like that! I’m already nervous enough as it is. Start talking about having to meet with an orc chieftain and I’m going to entirely lose my nerve.”

I rub the back of my neck, wondering if just perhaps this was a bad idea. Would a chieftain even have any interest in granting a human trading privileges in his village? I’ve been leaning more on the hope that it would be someone directly in charge of the market itself with an eye on the profit margins alone. Someone safe and of the sort that I can at least somewhat predict their motivations. Having to convince a chieftain to allow it feels incredibly daunting.

“Is there anything in particular you’re interested in shopping for?” Kassie asks, interrupting my inner panic-fest as she loops her arm through mine and tugs me off the front stoop and onto the cobbled road.

Glancing over at her, I give her a wan smile and gesture to myself. “I’m thinking something less Mrs. Andrew Bickner.”

Kassie’s eyes crinkle with amusement, and she squeezes my arm. “It’s about time. Mrs. Andrew Bickner needs a huge funeral pyre so we can welcome Lynn Taylor back to the living.”

I lean into her, chuckling. “Sounds like a damn good idea to me.”

The guest cottages are mercifully close to the market, so it doesn’t take us long to make our way out to the market entrance. The market, which had been empty on our arrival yesterday evening, was transformed. Everywhere I look, there’s a riot of tents set up, many of them a patchwork of colors as if scraps of different fabric were sewn together, each containing their own series of booths tended to by not only orcs but also other species.

There's even a centaur who has his back turned to us in a nearby stall as he grinds a blade on a sharpening wheel. *A blacksmith!* It's like the Ren Faires of my childhood but a hundred times better, as numerous species swarm about. The numerous voices mingle with the many different scents of produce, skewered roasting meat, and spices, perfumes, music, the bleat of livestock, and the vibrant color everywhere I look in a thrilling cacophony for the senses. I can pick out the human tourists easily enough, but this is all so incredible that I can't help but get caught up in the atmosphere.

"Wow," Kassie whispers at my side.

I nod wordlessly. There isn't a single word that could accurately convey the awe I'm feeling as we join the crowd. At the edges of the square, I can see the regular shops opening up. There aren't many. I can spot a clothier, and a stationery shop which I make a mental note of. An herbalist shop where one can speak to the healer is on the nearest corner. The tavern is the largest of those lining the square, but its doors are still firmly closed and likely won't open until sometime around noon if I'm not missing my guess. No breakfast places or cafés are anywhere in sight. I feel positively giddy at that realization. Even more so when I slide back the closure on the mouth of my mug, letting a whiff of richly perfumed steam escape as I prepare to take a drink, and notice several heads turn my way.

A man close by murmurs excitedly to his wife. "Is that coffee? Where do you suppose she got it?"

"I don't know, but if we find the place, I would kill for a cup," she whispers back.

I press my lips together to keep myself from smiling at that reaction. That is exactly what I was hoping for. Even more exciting, it's the non-humans with their more sensitive sense of smell whom I seem to have attracted from where I'm standing. Comprised largely of orcs, I find myself at the epicenter of several curious looks as they draw in the scent and rumble with a sound that seems distinctly like approval.

Yes!

Kassie squeezes my hand, drawing my attention to her. She's beaming and on the verge of squealing with delight.

"What is that?" a deep voice demands from just beside me.

It comes so unexpected and from so close that I nearly spill my drink as I jerk back in surprise. Swinging around, my eyes lands on a richly embroidered forest green tunic and go up and up to meet the startling bright green eyes of a very blue orc. A hint of gray makes his coloring appear like a stormy sky. A long, drawn-out rumble fills the air as his nostrils flare and he drags in the scent, his eyes closing as a look of hunger comes over his face. When he opens them again, that expression remains, but seems to intensify as his eyes slide over me appreciatively. His eyes practically glow in a way that's unnerving.

"I've never scented anything so wonderful. I would have the name... and the name of the drink too," he adds with a flirtatious smile.

Beside me, I hear Kassie give a strangled gasp and my grip tightens on her arm when I feel her attempt to slip away. I certainly don't want to be left alone with him! She squeaks slightly when she realizes that I'm holding her prisoner against my side, her body stumbling into me in the process. I am terrified beneath the full force of his interest, every instinct within me warning me to run far away from this male who would undoubtedly capture me.

A male who would use me up without qualms because it pleases him to. My eyes drop, noting the revealing cut of his tunic and tight breeches that display every contour of his body and the impressive bulge of his cock, and my lip curls. He even smells good, like some sort of expensive cologne combining cypress and vanilla. His tusks even have gold bands ringing them. Everything about his look is clearly cultivated to attract females, even the slight salt and pepper at his temples giving him a distinguished, mature look. And he's doing a fine job at it. A quick glance around confirms there's more than one admiring look being directed his way.

It seems even among orcs, a woman can't get away from fuckboys.

I haven't the time or patience for such bullshit, and I'm angry that I haven't been able to enjoy more than ten minutes in the market before attracting it.

"This," I say, shoving the cup into his face, "is my coffee. My business is making it for customers who pay. As for who I am... unless you have some inside source to get me a trade permit to set up a test shop here in the market, it's none of your business," I snap with a boldness that shocks even me.

The saner part of my brain starts screaming that he's going to kill me as his eyes narrow and his head lowers to meet my gaze. The less sane parts note that he's surprisingly clean shaven unlike many of the orc males I've spotted in the square, and that his wonderful smell is thicker and even more delicious up close. My belly quivers, but I set my jaw as I glare up at him.

His head cocks, his eyes glittering with an expression that I swear is fascination. "Very well," he purrs. "If it is permissions you are wanting, come right this way."

Straightening, he steps back and pushes through the crowd. At first, I stare after him, certain that I hallucinated those words until Kassie tugs my arm and I notice that he's stopped and has turned, looking back at us as he waits patiently.

"Oh my gods," I whisper.

"'Oh my gods' is right," Kassie hisses. "Since you've risked our lives enough for one morning, hurry up and get moving before you waste the opportunity and he changes his mind!"

Nodding mutely, I follow him with Kassie pressed close beside me as we push our way once more through the crowd. Once he's certain that we can keep up, he turns and resumes walking again with his long, speedy strides, not even attempting to keep his pace reasonable for us.

I hope he's able to help us, or else I'm going to murder him for dragging us through the market at this ridiculous pace. With a quick inquiry to Kassie to make sure she's okay, we follow him to the keep looming closer ahead of us.

No sweat. I'm sure all village business is handled there.

I certainly hope that's the case.

CHAPTER 5



My skin prickles with awareness as I feel the female watching me with a scathing intensity. I don't know why she pretends to dislike me so, but that knowledge does nothing to cool my libido. As far as my body is concerned, she is perfection, scowls and all. In fact, the fiercer her look, the more my lust spikes.

It's an orc thing, and one that I am quite certain would confuse her if she knew.

She's intoxicating, this nameless female.

I grin as she shoots me a venomous look before returning her attention to Orgath as he silently considers her request. The throne room is modest for the keep, just big enough to hold the simple, high-backed wooden bench with plush blue cushions that Orgath and his mate sit upon together and no more than twenty individuals. Gone are all the overdone embellishments that Lorf, his predecessor, had enjoyed.

It speaks to much of his rule, as solid and strong as the bare rock walls adorned with nothing but simple clan tapestries that hangs on two walls. If anything, his surroundings make our chieftain look all the more imposing, despite his own dark blue tunic that lacks any embroidery or embellishment. His hair, like mine, is beginning to silver, making his braids almost shimmer in the firelight, but his yellow eyes are sharper than ever, and the gold caps on his tusks that declare his position as chieftain make them appear even more prominent.

At his side, Sammi's small body is nestled close to him. She has grown lusher with the years after bearing many orclings to our chieftain, her red-gold hair showing its own threads of gray. She remains his only weakness. The one arm he often keeps curled around her is testimony to his protectiveness. That protectiveness has become a symbol to the clan of his benevolent kindness.

Now he holds her cup in his hand, his brow dipped low in thought. He has been enjoying the brew as we talk, and I'm jealous.

The word coffee had jogged my memory of a delicious drink I had enjoyed many years ago there. I covet another taste of it almost as much as I desire a taste of her. Unfortunately, I know one of those desires will not be satisfied because she's given the coffee over to the chieftain for his enjoyment as he debates her request. It is a sensible move on her part, still I can't help but feel jealous that she offered it to my cousin rather than me.

One of the guards beside me takes a covert sniff in her direction, and I can tell from his gaze that it has nothing to do with the cup of coffee that Orgath holds in his hand. The male is staring directly at her—the female I saw first.

I growl quietly, just loud enough to be audible to those standing closest to me. He jerks back and flicks wary eyes my way as the rest of the guard around us stiffens, their eyes fastening upon us. I ignore them, baring my tusks at him in a silent threat. As far as threats go, it is a subtle one, but one that no male in the clan would ignore. It indicates that he better keep his nose—and the rest of the body it is attached to—away from the female I've staked interest in. He is welcome to challenge me for courting rights, of course. Thankfully, the guards under my command are not idiots. He dips his head quickly and averts his gaze away from the human females.

"Don't you think that was a bit much?" a quiet voice inquires just behind my shoulder.

I don't need to look back to know that my brother Garval stands there, towering over me. He would be far more difficult to best if he had a mind to challenge me, but unlike many orcs, he has a mellower personality. And besides, he's not looking at my female but at the small, round red-haired human standing by her side. His nostrils flare, desire clouding his eyes before it banks out beneath his rigid self-control. I snort to myself, not understanding my brother's habit of self-denial.

He would rather wait forever, hoping that he might attract the attentions of that female than make a move to claim her. I think it is foolish. Now that I have that female's scent, she's mine as far as I'm concerned, bloodbonded or not.

I suspect that in that way I'm more like my cousin, Orgath, than my brother—just, minus the merciless cunning. I can be ruthless enough; I just prefer to carry out everything in a very direct manner. The same applies to mating. I haven't the patience for complex wooing strategies. Instead, my plan is simple: warn off the competition and press my

courtship until she accepts my claim. It doesn't need to be any more complicated than that, although I can see already that my brother doesn't agree with my plan.

"Not at all," I rumble back in a quiet voice. "It is just enough to get my intentions across now before anyone makes an attempt to court my female. I would hate to damage any of my guard if it can be avoided."

My brother huffs, and I turn my head just enough to catch him rolling his eyes skyward in silent prayer.

"I don't suppose it would occur to you that maybe she is not interested. She looks like she wishes to murder you rather than mate you."

"Yes, and that makes it all the more exciting," I agree. "I rouse her passions. I just need to get the right ones working in my favor."

"You're disturbing," he mutters, and I chuckle.

"I'm an orc who has scented the female he wishes to claim for his mate. It's only natural," I counter easily. "I am certain she feels it too. I knew from the moment our eyes met in the market." I nearly purr when she gives me another sharp glance. "You see? She can't keep her eyes off me."

My female. My mate. Mine, all mine!

After all this time waiting, I've found my mate. I'm sure of it, and I'm nearly as certain that she may be my bloodbound. There is no reason I would feel so strongly if she weren't. I would decimate the entire guard for her if I was pushed to.

Garval makes an impolite gagging sound at the back of his throat that make my fingers curl into a fist. If I were a lesser male, younger and more given to my impulses, I might have chopped him in the neck for that, but I choose to ignore him instead, my gaze devouring my female.

"Very well," Orgath agrees at last, no doubt due to his mate's prodding. As reluctant as he sounds, Sammi looks particularly gleeful at his side, and his expression softens. "You have permission to set up a temporary stall in the square. At the end of the harvest festival, we will meet again to discuss whether a permanent establishment will benefit Obrul-tarin. Your coffee is at very least as pleasing as I remembered," he said.

"Thank you, Chieftain," she says with a small bow.

He nods, his lips twitching once. "And what is your name, female?"

"Lynn Bi... I mean, Lynn Taylor. And this is my friend Kassie Edwards," she adds, gesturing to the silent female beside her.

Orgath nods in greeting to both females, though the latter seems intent on looking anywhere and everywhere but at him, and my mind caresses that singular sweet name.

Lynn. I mouth her name quietly to myself, enjoy the sound of it warming my mind. The sound of her name is fair, like something in one of the elvish tongues. Of course my lovely female would have a beautiful name.

“I wish you success with your venture, Lynn Taylor,” he says sincerely, and clasps his mate’s hand. “My mate, Sammi, desires more humans to keep company with and more of the things she enjoyed from your world. If you are successful and provide at least the latter, I will be grateful.”

A pink hue spreads over her cheeks, and I worry that my female is embarrassed except that she grins broadly and nods her head.

“I will attempt to do exactly that,” she promises. “Thank you for the opportunity. I’ve taken up enough of your time, so with your permission I will go enjoy the rest of your lovely market.”

Orgath’s smile becomes more indulgent and filled with pride. Since coming to rule, the market, especially during our festivals, have grown exponentially as he used the ties developed among other species to further the prosperity of our clan in ways none of his predecessors would have dreamed to. The recent addition of human tourism is just another extension of that work. One that seems quite promising for our village, with all the wealth the humans bring into our clan from Ov’Ge.

“Yes, do enjoy it,” he agrees. “And take one of my guards with you to assist you in case you have any questions. He will assist you for the duration of your week.”

I grin triumphantly. That’s the opening I need. The only excuse I need to make sure that I’m by her side. I’m not surprised, however, that she resists his offer as she casts a wary glance at me.

“Oh, I don’t know if that’s necess...” she starts to object, but our chieftain cuts her off.

“It is necessary,” Orgath sternly interrupts. “If you choose to start a business here, you will need someone dependable to assist you in getting settled into the market and securing reasonable prices from our shops and sellers. For the week you are here, you are Clan Obrul, and I will not have anyone taking advantage of you.”

I step forward and incline my head. "I will be pleased to assist the females during the first half of the day. The guard can be trusted to look after themselves for the first few hours, at least during the market hours. I will return before the shift change and then spend the rest of the afternoon seeing to my regular duties."

My cousin regards me thoughtfully. "Adjusting your schedule like that will make for long days. It is a big sacrifice, Bodi."

I shrug. "It is, as you say, only for a week. Sleep can come later. I assume, after the week is over, that accommodations would be arranged for a safe, permanent workspace for her."

Orgath inclines his head in agreement. "You assume correctly. Very well. Alter your schedule accordingly. You will be assigned to accompany Lynn and her friend for the duration of their visit."

"Wait, why him?" Lynn object, shooting me an annoyed look that makes my pulse stutter with adoration. "Why can't I pick which of the guards babysits me?"

The chieftain's eyebrows rise curiously. "You are familiar enough with my guard and orcs in general that you can choose a male or female from among them who would be best suited to assist you?"

The pink in her cheeks darkens, and this time I know she's embarrassed. I give a warning growl, and my cousin's gaze is sharp when it lands on me, forcing me to swallow the territorial sound. Not that my female noticed the exchange, even if the rest of the guard did and is staring at me in shock. She is too busy scowling down at her shoes as she shakes her head. If she heard my growl at all, she likely assumed it came from him.

"No," she admits with a huff of exasperation. When she raises her gaze again, her expression is chagrined. "You're right. Okay, if you're confident that this... Bodi... is the right orc for the job, I guess I can't object to it."

My skin prickles at the sound of my name falling off her lips. The moment is ruined, however, when Sammi laughs at her obvious reluctance.

"He's not so bad," Sammi assures her, this time drawing some laughter from the guard.

I cast the guard a dark look before striding over to my female's side. My Lynn. She doesn't look at me again before she strides out of the room with her distracted companion in tow, leaving me to trail behind, but I don't mind. I like to watch her bottom wiggle beneath her loose pants as

she walks, her hips swinging enticingly. My mouth salivates as I imagine stroking my tongue along her bottom and over each hip.

Her awareness of my presence snaps in the air between us, but still she is determined to ignore me as she stalks back down to the market. It is as if she is challenging my determination to claim her with every delectable stride.

Oh, my lovely female, I'm definitely up to the challenge.

CHAPTER 6



LYNN

The flirtatious idiot trailing after us is staring at my ass. I can feel his eyes boring into my bottom with every step. I don't know what to make of him. It's not like I don't feel an undeniable pull to him, but after getting out of one bad relationship, I'm not so stupid as to eagerly jump into another just because of an impressively strong case of lust. Especially not with another high-maintenance male.

Gods save me from the perfectly tailored and groomed males who spend more time on their appearance than I have the patience or desire for.

At least he's no longer leading us in a breakneck speed that made me want to throttle him for the discomfort he was carelessly putting Kassie through. Finding out after arriving at the keep that we just barely made it in time to see the chieftain had taken some of the sting out of my anger. I'm just glad that he's now content to let us set the pace rather than put us at another grueling rush through the crowds.

Thank goodness for that. I certainly don't want Kassie to be dropping her baby early and here of all places where there's zero technology to help her out. Now that he's following leisurely behind us, I seem to be all the more aware of him at the knife's edge of arousal. It's highly uncomfortable, like an itch under the taunts and teases, but horribly elusive, just as his sweet, warm scent inspires new surges of desire every time he is close enough for it to wash over me.

I really dislike how good he smells, and the way his closeness makes my stomach knot up with a sexual tension. It makes it too easy to forget that he's a shameless flirt, or the fact that I'm angry at his decision to just haul us through the market to thrust us before his chieftain with absolutely no warning. I'm grateful, but at the same time, that was the most uncomfortable couple of hours of my life with zero opportunity to prepare, outside of the short presentation I had worked out. Bodi's high-handed manner is definitely not attractive.

Fuck, why do I even try to lie to myself? He's insanely attractive in a brutish sort of way, but experience has taught me that it's also very bad for

me. If I had to be attracted to an orc, why couldn't it be one of the rugged, solid orcs that are everywhere instead of this strutting peacock?

Casually, I allow my gaze to roam over the market, determined to look anywhere but back toward him, and my eyes happen to settle on a muscular orc with an ashen complexion. Dark hair spills over his shoulder as he bends down to heave up an enormous crate of produce onto his shoulder. The display is impressive. His bared muscles, while no larger than Bodi's, bulge prominently with the sweat of honest work. He's romance novel cover-worthy.

And to my frustration, I feel nothing.

I curse silently as we pass, keeping my eyes glued on the surprisingly smooth cobbled road in front of my feet. It's been over five years ago since I felt even the curl of interest toward anyone since my ex managed to kill my libido with his demands over the course of our marriage. Why couldn't it have been someone like that orc who gets my long silent engine revving once again? All untamed yumminess who can potentially be a match for the new life I'm trying to capture with my freedom.

No, I lust after the fool in the tight breeches and extravagant tunics who thinks he's in charge. I guess some things never really change.

The menacing growl behind me, however, startles me. I turn back to see Bodi standing in a confrontational posture, his arms loose at his side as he exchanges a hard look with the shirtless orc who had, at some point turned toward me. My eyebrows shoot up as my assigned guard dog takes a step closer to me, his bulk hovering over me as he bares brutal tusks and impressively large fangs at the other male. To my horror, the stranger snarls in return, his large chest swelling up in what looks like a challenge.

"Lynn?" Kassie frets at my side, her gaze swinging nervously back and forth between the two hostile males.

"I'll handle this," I murmur and gently extricate myself from her so that I can stalk toward my new personal pain in the ass.

Rushing over to Bodi's side, I curl my hand on one massive bicep. My hand looks impossibly tiny against his muscle, but I sharply apply pressure as I tug insistently on him. It has little effect, other than making both males stop and tip their heads toward me quizzically.

"Okay, boys, enough of this posturing," I gripe as I pull on his arm with all of my strength. His large body shifts, but I know it's more in

response to my demands than any actual ability to budge him from where he stands. "I have too much to do today for this ridiculousness," I clarify.

To my surprise, Bodi backs up closer to me, his opposite hand engulfing my smaller one still clutched around his bicep, effectively trapping my hand against him as he warily retreats from the other orc. His body bristles with tension despite the smug smile curving his lips.

"Don't you have duties to return to, Fellek?" he growls, caging his larger body around mine as he glares at his apparent rival. "Outside of trying to tempt and pursue a guarded female?"

The way he says that sounds laced with a lot more meaning than his words automatically convey to me. The translation magic that immediately weaves around those who pass through the portals makes his words easy enough to understand, but even it can't convey subtleties that are clearly present.

The other male wrinkles his nose and snorts, and gold-shot eyes turn toward me. He jerks his chin belligerently toward Bodi.

"Do you wish for this male's company?" he rasps.

The question feels loaded, like once again I'm missing something, but I shrug nonchalantly. I mean, it's not like I have much of a choice. In the scheme of things, however, I know that a non-answer is always better than giving an outright wrong answer.

The male's mouth tightens, even as Bodi's smile grows wider and somehow all the more menacing. Finally, this Fellek guy snorts and rolls his shoulders before stepping back from us. The smile he gives me drips with masculine interest as he attempts to ignore Bodi stiffening at my side.

"If you decide that you wish for another... protector, come find me. Ask anywhere in the square for Fellek and someone will point the way to me."

"Yeah, okay," I mutter speculatively as I step back a pace and find myself unexpectedly herded farther away as Bodi turns and presses his body against me to create more distance.

The other male curls his lip but turns to retrieve the crate he'd set down during the confrontation to lumber away with it.

Kassie giggles nervously as I duck away from Bodi and pull her over beside me.

She shakes her head. "That was...something else."

Bodi's expression relaxes, and he straightens his tunic a bit as he gives Kassie a cheerful smile. "Do not concern yourself with Fellek. All orcs are decisive, so his actions are typical to what an unmated female might encounter wandering in our village without a guard. Part of the reason you have me."

There's that word again... *Guard*. I squint at him, but his expression is deceptively calm as he looks around the market casually.

"Is there something in particular you are interested in purchasing?" he asks.

I suck in my lips as I regard him. Truthfully, I'm debating the most effective way of getting rid of him. I don't object to the idea of having someone from the guard watching out for us, but just not him—not when he makes my body argue with my common sense. Then there's that strange behavior between him and Fellek. It seems like a very dangerous combination, a distraction that I don't need. In the end, any guard will do but him. So the question now is, how to discourage his interest?

The idea comes to me while I watch his lips purse as he scans the chaos all around us. I know that look. It is the look of a man who wants to get in, get what's required, and escape the bustling crowds. I bet he doesn't even shop in the market but has someone come and take his measurements. The image that produces comes close to making me laugh, but I somehow manage to hold it in because he's looking back at me, waiting for direction.

The best way to get rid of him is simply to make this one long shopping adventure that he won't soon forget.

"Oh, a little of this and a little of that. I'm in no hurry. I want to see everything!" I enthuse, going more than a little over the top with my performance as I inject a bit of shrill excitement into my voice.

He winces slightly, his expression turning wary as if bracing for the worst as he once again turns his attention to the crowd.

"Very well," he murmurs. "Perhaps we can start with these stalls over here."

He gestures to a nearby line of stalls filled with goods. I see some clothing that looks like it might be promising among them. My fingers itch to explore the fabrics, but I restrain myself. We will get to them... eventually.

I sigh and shake my head, scanning the throng of customers clustered around the tavern that has clearly opened for lunch business. My stomach chooses that moment to growl as I catch the scent of stew on the air.

“Actually, I think I would like to get a bite to eat first,” I suggest, pointing over to the tavern. “And then we can start with those stalls near it and just work our way around.”

Bodi’s eyes widen as he looks in the direction I indicate, and I could almost laugh at the dismay that briefly settles over his face before he catches himself and gives me a perfunctory nod, a cheerful grin plastered on his face.

Oh, boy, this is going to be fun.

I silently snicker as our roles are reversed and I’m the one following him, his enormous body cutting through the crowd like a knife through butter as humans and other smaller species work to get out of his path. I have to admit that this part of having an orc around is useful. I could have used him last time I went to Mardi Gras, especially now that so many of the fae crowds have become passionate about the festivities making the festival three times more crowded than it’s ever been.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Kassie giving me a questioning glance, but I run a finger meaningfully over my smiling lips. Her eyes widen, and she slaps a hand over her mouth in attempt to keep from laughing. Subtle my dear friend is not, but thankfully our grimacing orc guide is paying very little attention as he attempts to lead us toward the tavern entrance.

CHAPTER 7



The tavern, despite its size, is crowded. Everywhere there is a press of bulky bodies. The leaner, brilliant green trolls with their purple hair stand out, as do the human-sized, deep emerald goblins amid the orcs laughing and talking within the large open room. Although many wear simple woven clothes, there is a riot of colorful tunics as cloaks and coats are cast off. The pair of centaurs near the entrance is the easiest to spot, one reddish brown and the other dappled. Their composure is stiff and wary with all the excitement around them—but that's centaurs for you. The fauns are curiously absent, but there is a table where several wood nymphs are settled around a group of humans, likely feeling safer around those of similar size and stature as themselves.

I can understand that. The tavern, The Ax and Mace, shows plenty of signs of conflict that comes from serving an orc clan. Worn rock walls are deeply scarred from seeing the impact of an ax, mace, or sword a time or two, and the little surviving wood in here has fared no better. Still, the atmosphere is boisterous and filled with a certain good cheer. Woven grain stalks hang from the walls to bring good luck and prosperity, and colorfully painted and carved dried gourds from the previous year are mounted on the walls between the large horns and antlers and more than one carved skull. It makes a for a festive atmosphere, and compared the cool air outdoors, the tavern verges on the edge of being overly warm from the crowd.

Normally, I would love the bustling atmosphere, but with my female surrounded by so many males, a number of them not even trusted kin from my clan, it makes me uneasy. I'm struck by the memory of my cousin hiding his mate under a cloak and suddenly I understand that desire all too well. Although I have no reason to hide her, since humans are less of a rarity in Ov'Gorg, there is still that desire to hide her away from the interest of other males who might wish to pursue her. Even her small friend, Kassie, seems too vulnerable to have exposed in this place. Not

during the harvest festival when the village is flooded with strange, unknown males.

Nostrils flaring, my entire body stiff with tension, I lead the females toward the back, away from the rowdier activity closer to the bar. Some of my kinsmen look up as we pass, eyes bright with curiosity. I give them a subtle nod, walking as close to Lynn as she will allow. Her gaze threatens death when I brush too close, but it's all worth it so that the males around me are aware that I'm guarding my female and so not to approach her. One of the males looks upon her a bit too curiously for longer than I like, but he immediately backs down when I bare my teeth at him, emphasizing the cruel curve of my tusks.

I'm not the captain of the guard just because my cousin is the chieftain. I've proven myself in combat many times to earn the position, and the males of my clan know it well by the gold rings banding my tusks that demonstrate my rank and victories. They are awarded only to the strongest of orcs. Even those who have come from neighboring territories are smart enough to give me some berth.

As we settle at our table, I scan the tavern for sign of my sister, Ehndera, or rather, Erra, as she prefers to be called. She often tends to the customers while her mate, Gavith, prepares the fare served here. Some might have expected their roles to be otherwise—except that anyone who knows my sister knows she can't cook anything without burning it beyond recognition. Since her mate is a decent cook, their arrangement works best between them. The large opening that looks out from the cooking area is sizeable enough that her mate's surly slate gray face can often be seen watching over her, promising death to anyone who acts inappropriately. It is laughable, since my sister is an accomplished fighter herself, but orc males are not known to be reasonable when it comes to guarding our mates.

With my sister nowhere in sight, I wave down Ashglad, her oldest offspring. He trudges about with a bin, collecting used dishes from the tables, his mouth working as he grumbles to himself. At twenty, he still has the gangly look of a juvenile orc, but he will fill out soon enough. One of few orcs who have a rare ochre coloring and possessing long chestnut brown hair, he is very much like his mother, right down to his impatient glower when some of the customers get too raucous. His expression

brightens, however, upon seeing me, and he hastens back to the kitchen with his load before making his way to our table.

There are a few growls from patrons as Ashglad pushes his way through, but he seems to ignore them all easily and arrives at our table with an eager smile, showing adult tusks that are still oversized for his youthful face since they grew in two summers ago.

“Ehndera here?” I ask.

He shakes his head, his gaze cutting curiously to the females with me. “Nah, she had to go to the market to refresh supplies. She’ll be back later.” His smile turns mischievous. “I won’t tell her you called her that for a copper.”

I snort and flick a coin to the male. Ashglad catches out of the air and pockets it with quick ease. Although I give him a relaxed grin, inwardly I’m relieved. If Erra had seen me with Lynn there would be no end to her curiosity. I would like to woo my mate without her annoying interference. As my womb-mate twin, she loves me fiercely but also enjoys watching me squirm more than I like. More than I would wish for my female to see.

“We will take three bowls of stew with sides of elworsh bread and ales all around.”

The red-haired female, Kassie, immediately shakes her head. “No ale for me, thanks.”

She pats her rounded belly that protrudes shockingly from her curvy figure now that she’s removed her overcoat. I swallow a groan at my blunder. She’s whelping. I immediately feel like the worst sort of knave to have led the females on at such a quick pace earlier.

“My apologies, I did not realize. I will mind my pace with far more care from here on out,” I sincerely promise, my hand reaching out toward her, palm up in show of penitence.

Her eyebrows fly up, but she smiles shyly and nods.

“That’s very sweet, isn’t it, Lynn?” she says, cutting a meaningful look toward my female.

Lynn, however, regards me suspiciously as if she is trying to work out my angle. I silently snort. As if that would discourage me. She is suspicious, but that is no different than how any female among my kind would view the gesture, however honestly it may be offered. Still, there is something in her expression that eases, and that pleases me.

“What is elworsh bread?” she asks, changing the topic.

I glance over at Ashglad. “Make that an ale and two ciders... unless you would like ale as well?” I say, directing the question to her. She shakes her head and sends the male away with our order. Leaning back in my chair, I smile.

“Elworsh is a coarse orcish bread made for stews. The hard outer crust also helps it travel well for rations when necessary. It is very filling, which is a good thing because there are not many good growing lands for grain. Our orchards do well enough, growing in the rougher terrain of our territory, but the grain only grows well in a few valley pockets. My sister’s mate buys a weekly supply of flour from the lowland mill and closes the tavern the first day of every week to pray to the grain mother and make the bread.”

Her eyebrows rise a bit, and I have the feeling I’ve caught her interest—which excites me beyond all reason. I want to draw her mind out to play.

“Besides this elworsh bread, what else do you make with it?”

I scratch my jaw and consider. “Meat pies are thrown together in the evening. They are a favorite of mine. I can’t think of much else right from memory,” I admit.

For some reason, her lips tip down with disappointment. “No pastries and sweets perhaps?” she presses.

I shake my head. “Not that I know of.”

“Damn.” Her low mutter catches me by surprise, but I attempt to refrain from inquiring further into it.

That lasts about thirty seconds.

“Why? Are you missing a favorite food from your home?” I school my features into an expression of sympathy although I’m not terribly fond of most sweet foods myself. If it is important to her, though, I’m eager to know.

She gives me a strange look but shakes her head. “Not exactly. Although I do imagine that I would after a while. It’s just that I’m accustomed to selling my coffees with the option of some sort of sweet bread, muffin, donut... something.” She sighs and runs her hands through her short hair. “I’ll just have to figure that one out when I come to it. For right now, I’m just selling coffee anyway. Maybe I can hire a baker cross-portal.”

She is clearly talking to herself and not to me, so I wisely stay silent rather than offer my opinion. There are not many grown males I know in

my village who enjoy sweet things the way that humans do, but it is possible that there would be a few who might indulge, especially if accompanied by the black bitter brew. The thought of her hiring a stranger and bringing them into our village—a stranger who would be with her every day as she made her coffees—made my blood boil. My claws curled with my instinctive desire to tear up something.

Thankfully, Ashglad makes a timely arrival with our food, serving as the perfect distraction as he sets a basket of bread and large bowls of hearty stew in front of us. The ale is sparkling and crisp in its mug, a shade or two darker than the cider in the other two cups.

“Food, thank goodness,” Kassie murmurs appreciatively, drawing her bowl closer.

I grin at her enthusiasm as I watch her tuck into her meal. It seems that humans are no different than the whelping females of my own species. I chuckle when Kassie moans at her bite, and Lynn echoes it with her own small gasp of pleasure. It pleases me to see the humans enjoying orcish fare. We haven’t always been so lucky with visitors who peer at our rustic stews and meat pies as if we are offering them something unsavory. Ridiculous, I say.

The stew set before us is a beautiful sight, thick brown gravy concealing tasty chunks of mutton, rosemary, garlic, the bite of pepper and salt among the potatoes, carrots, peas, and other vegetables. The golden-brown bread has a delightful crunch, and I immediately use a chunk to sop up some of the gravy before taking a generous bite of my own. Lynn also seems to be enjoying it, which delights me more than I can say. I want her to enjoy the food and atmosphere of our village so that she will want to make her home here. Although she eats at a more sedate pace, I can see her tense frame slowly relaxing as the hot stew works its way into her.

Despite the noise in the front part of the tavern, our meal ends up being surprisingly enjoyable. As they eat, the females chat, discussing all manner of plans for the possible future café and their strategy for working the market this week. I listen attentively so that I can arrange for their table to be placed correctly even as I make a mental note to bring Haith to haul her supplies rather than leaving him in the keep stables. Knowing the lazy delfass, he will be content to doze in the sun while the females ply their coffees on passersby.

The only disruption is when a goblin is thrown halfway across the room by one of my kinsmen. A snarl and growled rebuke are all the warning the poor male got before the ill-tempered orc tossed him through the air for the insult of bumping into the larger male and spilling his lager all over him. I wince in sympathy when the goblin's body strikes the table beside ours, sending broken dishes and cutlery scattering, but that doesn't stop me from leaping to my feet.

I eye the crowd, my arms extended out from my side as I brace for any potential attack whether accidental or intentional. Eyes turn toward me as I suddenly gain everyone's attention. It surprises me for all until I realize that I'm growling, and the sound is loud and quite hostile in the silence now filling the tavern. Gavith steps out from the kitchen, his arms crossing over his chest as he eyes the situation. I quiet when his scrutiny turns my way, and I let out a polite cough as I glance back over at my companions. They are both watching with wide-eyed stares that I'm not able to successfully interpret. Subtly sniffing the air, I don't detect any sign of genuine fear, though I don't care for the wary way they study me either.

In attempt to defuse the situation, I give them my most charming smile. "Is there anything else you would like, or are you ready to set out into the market?"

As one, they nod and scramble to their feet. I am relieved. The last thing I want is for either of them to be accidentally injured by someone being careless of the smaller human females. Those humans who remain in the tavern are clustered into groups farther away from everyone else, watching everything with the wide-eyed interest and laughable superiority of spectators.

I'm not sure I like it, or the way some of the human men look at me as I escort my charges out the door. One male in particular with light brown hair and the scruff of a new beard on his jaw frowns at me and begins to rise, as if he suspects me of some wrongdoing. Insulted, I bare my teeth at him as we pass. I'm gratified when he recoils and, upon noting the lack of support from his fellows who busy themselves with their food and drinks, immediately deflates and sits back down.

It seems that courting my female has challenges that I had not considered. I've never seen any of our human visitors trouble Orgath over his mate, but then again, the chieftain keeps careful guard over Sammi. When he has her outside of the keep while outsiders are present, he keeps

no less than two guards with them. A show of force must be enough to deter them, whereas a lone male they consider an easy target. That is a mistake any male who dares to attack me will not make twice.

My protective instincts roused, I hover over Lynn and her friend as they make their way through the market. Truthfully, I enjoy shopping on most occasions and even possess a talent for haggling, but I find that I'm feeling irrationally territorial, especially after the unpleasantness at the tavern. I don't like how exposed my female is, or her friend. In the harvest festival market, I'm all too aware that danger can come from any angle, made worse by the knowledge that while I'm able to guard her and warn off rivals, I have no true permanent mate claim. The combined stress is making me guard more aggressively, and I want nothing more than to get my female back to a defensible position.

Unfortunately, our progress is excruciatingly slow. They insist on stopping at every vendor to admire the items displayed, though they purchase very little. Some fruit is bought, some parcels of various foodstuffs that appeals to them. Kassie seems eager to try every sample that is offered, and Lynn is happy to oblige her. Understanding that this is the way of whelping females, I keep my frustration to myself.

There is some relief as my anxiety gradually eases and drains away when no further threat comes. That said, the afternoon seems to drag on a great length of time as they coo and examine everything in a way that is beyond anything I have ever witnessed. They seem to need to touch everything and show each other everything as if they are drawing out every minute they spend at each stall, yet despite their preoccupation, I note the way their eyes slide over to me when they think I'm not paying attention.

I don't think anything of it at first, but as the afternoon wears on and our progress through the market has not improved, once I begin to regain my calm, I start to notice those furtive looks more and more. They especially come whenever they appear to be admiring the items in their hands the most. My lips quirk at this odd behavior.

Do they truly imagine that I do not notice?

I hold back an amused rumble of laughter and continue to watch them with curiosity.

It occurs to me that this whole venture is taking a suspiciously long time.

My eyes narrow on the females as they head toward a cluster of stalls laden with tables piled high with clothes of all colors imaginable from bright to dull. This whole section of the market is for the various clothiers who've brought their wares. Orcs, trolls, and goblins are foremost among the vendors, each jockeying for position as they attempt to nudge the other out of the way, lifting one item after another for Lynn and Kassie to inspect. They select the finest materials and most beautiful colors, varying from pale pinks to brilliant roses, violets, azures, golds, and emeralds, and everything in between to set before the females.

I watch Lynn inspect a pale rose-colored tunic elegantly embroidered with rose gold thread, privately hoping that she purchases it. She is awash in golds and browns, which suit her coloring just fine, but pale next to the vibrant spark of her personality. She is far too bold for the earth tones, her spirit thirsting for more.

To my pleasure, Lynn begins to accumulate a number of articles in varieties of vibrant pinks and blues, with a bit of royal purple and shimmering greens added to her selection. She even adds a dusky rose woolen coat to her pile and several knit scarves in a rainbow of hues. Whereas she picked over other things in the market with little true interest despite the way she dawdled, here she is voracious in her selections, but no quicker. In fact, every time she begins to add to her pile, I watch in fascination as she seems to hold herself back and slowly peruse other items, as if forcing herself to slow down. I struggle not to grin outright when she glances covertly my way while lingering over another particularly well-embroidered tunic. I see how slowly her fingers trace over the knotwork design and nearly bark with laughter.

Now I understand perfectly. She thinks this shopping of hers will dissuade me.

Snorting with amusement, I settle against a post and watch with a lazy smile, captivated by my female's antics. In fact, now that I'm no longer suffering paranoia that males are going to come rushing at me, I find myself enjoying it more and more. I make a game of watching for those cunning little glances, and find myself simply enjoying her interest in everything. I especially love the way she entrusts her packages to my care, and I lovingly carry them as I continue to follow her about.

By the time the midday comes and the market prepares to close, I can see that while she is satisfied with her purchases, she is less than pleased

with my cheerfulness. She scowls at me mightily the entire way back to her cottage as she cuts now frustrated looks my way. Each glower makes my smile widen because she is so adorable, and it makes me all the more certain that she was playing games with me. She is about to see that I enjoy games too, and there is no way she is going to get rid of me. Especially not when Orgath himself has trusted them to my care.

She doesn't deign to speak to me other than a curt "thank you" when I set her packages down inside. She sinks sullenly into a chair as if she's exhausted but appears determined to ignore me. I glance around the comfortable interior of the guest cottage. It is the first time I've been inside one since they were built.

The design is typical of our homes, although a bit more compact, the large hearth dominating the main room as is proper. The pair of chairs sitting in front of the hearth are generously cushioned as they should be and dyed a deep wine red that is pleasing to the eye. There are a few more cushions stacked near a wall at a safe distance from the fire that match the chairs, ready for anyone who might want to pull one out to laze in front of the fire. Overall, it is... nice. Everything is clean, the gray stone walls whitewashed and clear of dust, and it still has that new feeling to it, but it is sparse. I can't help but to think that Lynn would look far more comfortable in my home. The one thing that it has that my own home lacks is the delicious lingering aroma of coffee in the air, mingling with a hint of chocolate.

"Are you planning to attend any of the events tonight?" I inquire gently, reluctant to part company with them despite my responsibilities waiting for me.

She shakes her head and Kassie groans as she too sinks into a chair.

"No, I think we're both ready just to call it a day," the other female says, her smile wan. "I'm sure this must have been very tedious for you," she adds.

I press my lips together to keep them from tipping and shake my head. "Not at all. I found it quite enjoyable. I look forward to our day together tomorrow."

To my amusement, my comments don't inspire any reaction, and I believe that they will not give the game away at all until, as I'm walking out the door, I hear Kassie whisper.

"I guess *that* didn't work."

“Fuck.” Lynn’s growled reply is an absolute delight.

When I’m far enough away not to upset my sweet female, I let the laughter roll out as I walk back to the keep. I still have duties to see to, but this shall keep me amused throughout the remainder of my day. I can’t wait to see what the next day brings.

CHAPTER 8



LYNN

Fuck. Me. There's more to this orc than I had expected. How the hell am I going to resist a male who takes everything I throw at him with good grace and amusement, and who shows some humility and kindness in the face of his error as he had when he realized that Kassie is pregnant? I'm not sure how that escaped his notice, but his shock had been real and his apology genuine. I don't know how to feel about this. It was easier to keep my distance before I got these insights into the male beneath the polished image.

A shiver skates over my skin as I recall the way he protected us when the tavern turned unruly. Add the indulgent way he smiled while I was picking out clothes. For fuck's sake, I've never seen a man look less than slightly annoyed when I want to stop and look at things. Despite his agitation at the start of the shopping venture—which I suspect was largely due to him being wound up by what happened in the tavern—he was surprisingly a good sport and pleasant company.

Despite being aggravating as hell and gaudy as a Vegas headliner, I'm actually starting to... like... him.

Ugh.

Physical attraction is bad enough, but starting to like him spells my doom. Which is why I'm sitting here clutching my coffee as I await his appearance at my door as if I were waiting for the arrival of the Grim Reaper himself.

Kassie glances over at me, her lips curling in amusement as she cradles her mug of cocoa. "You don't have to look like your getting ready to be marched to your death," she teases. "So your plan didn't work out. He wasn't so bad. Besides, it's only for a week. You never know, this could work out."

I grunt into my cup, my eyes narrowing on my best friend suspiciously. "Work out how exactly?"

She shrugs, not the least put off by my surly, still-on-my-first-cup attitude, and smooths the blanket lying on her lap. "I would be a terrible

BFF if I didn't at least hope you might find someone nice, especially since you will be moving here all alone."

Slowly lowering my mug, I raise an eyebrow. "Are you seriously contemplating me and that... that..."

"Sweetheart?" she provides, ignoring my snort. "Yes. I can tell that you like him, and anyone with eyes can see that he *really* likes you."

"So he wins stalker of the year. That makes him boyfriend material?"

She snickers and lobs a marshmallow at me from the bag tucked into the chair beside her hip.

I snatch it out of the air before it can pelt me in the forehead and scowl down at the fluff-puffed bit of gooey sweetness in my hand.

"I don't think he quite qualifies as a stalker," she objects, her lips twitching in an obvious attempt to hold in another giggle. "But I do like the fact that, just by watching the way he is around you, this guy will treat you the way you deserve."

"Gods forbid someone treat me like I deserve. That could be a punishment, for all you know!" I laugh, lobbing the marshmallow back at her.

Her eyes dance with laughter as the marshmallow plops harmlessly on her harvest orange sweater, but she purses her lips, declining to comment as she takes another sip of her cocoa.

I down the last of the contents of my mug and stand up, making my way to the little kitchen at the rear of the cottage to pour another, when I hear a thump at my door. I start to turn, but Kassie pushes herself up from her chair and waves me back.

"I got it. Get that second cup in you before I have to worry about you murdering anyone," she says brightly.

Leaning against the long table that serves as a counter in here, I turn and watch the door open as I pour more coffee into my mug. As expected, Bodi stands in the doorway. His hair is pulled back into a single thick braid, and he wears a fine vest, dyed a dark autumnal gold, over a deep burgundy tunic with gold embroidery at the neck and sleeves. His brown pants are as fitted as ever, revealing the long, sculpted contours of his legs. The heavy muscles of his thighs, from what little I can see, are enough to make a grown woman beg. To my relief, the cut of his tunic is longer and loose so that, even when belted, it hangs about mid-thigh.

“Hi, Bodi,” Kassie greets him as she steps back to give him enough room to enter.

“Morning,” he rumbles pleasantly with a nod and steps inside. His eyes fall on me, and his smile widens and his green eyes heat as he looks me over. “Good morning, Lynn. You are looking particularly lovely this morning.”

I can feel the flush spreading up my cheeks despite my best abilities to control it. The soft rose pink knit tunic that I’m wearing is something that my ex would have called out as too childish-looking seconds before he demanded that I change. That Bodi is admiring my appearance sends delight shooting through me like a drug, even as it manages to completely disarm me in a way that scares me. The last thing I want, however, is for him to know that, so when I reply, my words and smile are sharp.

“Good morning. Glad to see you’re fully dressed today.”

His warm chuckle invades my senses, wrapping around me. “I was wearing one of my more stylish tunics for the start of the harvest festivities, but seeing how you didn’t seem to like it much, I decided to tone it down a mite today.” He breathes deep, and the rumble sound of pleasure he makes is practically a purr—and godsdamn does it affect me. I could nearly cum from that delicious sound. “Is that coffee you have there?”

I blink down at the pot in my hand and set what is left on the table. “Yeah, you might as well help yourself if you like. Since you are going to be following us around and helping out, the least I can do is supply you with a cup,” I grumble as I turn to the cupboard to fetch a spare mug.

His smile widens as he accepts it, revealing the full length of the gold bands around his tusks. It seems he’s still clinging to that ostentatious bit of bling even if he has dialed back his style some.

“It is much appreciated,” he rumbles.

“Sugar, creamer?”

“And ruin this perfect brew? Not at all.”

His comment does a funny thing to my heart as it feels like it turns sentimentally in my chest in the face of his obvious appreciation. As he leans down to pick up the pot, I can see Kassie over his shoulder miming fanning herself as she mouths the words, “*He’s hot!*”

I wrinkle my nose at her, but fuck is she ever right. No doubt she’s getting a good look at his ass too the way he’s bent forward. Lucky bitch. I

consider shifting a bit to see if I can get a look, but he straightens again and sighs happily as he breathes in the steam rising from his cup.

My eyebrows rise at the look of bliss on his face.

“Like coffee, do you?”

“A true elixir of the gods,” he agrees. “It is the one thing I’ve truly missed from your world.”

“You’ve been to the human world? I didn’t think many orcs made their way over there.”

He shakes his head and gives me a sad look. “Humans fear orcs too much for us to be wandering about in your world. We are much larger than your kind and look fearsome. I’m honestly surprised that there are even humans who wish to come here.”

I wrinkle my nose a bit again. “To be honest with you, I think that is largely because they hope to catch sight of other beings.”

His green eyes crinkle with amusement and he nods, taking a long, happy sip. “I’ll give you that. Humans have not been the least bit shy conveying that to us. But this is only our second year opening our portal to your people. Perhaps that will turn around too.”

I give him a skeptical look, but we fall silent as we sip from our cups, enjoying the life-giving substance that is coffee. Kassie keeps looking at me with meaningful little glances as she tips her head to Bodi. I give her a tiny frown and a subtle shake of my head. My friend rolls her eyes and redirects her attention fully to our orc companion.

“So, Bodi, I’m guessing you have a plan on how to get our supplies down to the square?” Kassie asks sweetly.

He nods as he takes another deep sip. “Yes. I have Haith hitched to a cart that we can transport your supplies in.”

I blink. I can’t say I’ve seen a single sign of anything remotely equestrian around here. Outside of the presence of the centaurs, that is.

“Haith? What’s a Haith?” I ask, uncertain if I really want to know the answer.

He chuckles, downs the rest of his coffee, and gestures to the door where our supplies are stacked. “Come meet him, and I’ll get the supplies.”

I exchange a nervous look with Kassie, and we pull on our coats and scarves as he strides over to the door and opens it. He stops only to pick up the entire stack of crates in one muscle-bulging move that leaves me

gaping, striding out with our supplies. It's with equal measure of trepidation and curiosity that I follow after him, Kassie close on my heels. I don't get further than the front stoop before I see exactly what Haith is. I can feel Kassie's fingers clenching into my tunic as she too spies the mystery critter.

It's a cat. And not just some house cat either. It's more like Rambo Kitty. Inky black and the size of a large pony, keen blue eyes turn toward us from where the animal is hitched to the cart. Bodi carries the crates to the back of the cart and loads them, tying them down with anchors on the cart's wooden frame. There is a comfortable mound of cushions tied down to one side that he gestures to.

"This here is where you're going to sit, Kassie," he calls overly cheerfully. "I made sure it is nice and comfortable for you."

Kassie squeaks a quick thank you, her eyes never once leaving Haith. She does, however, look relieved that she will be riding in the back of the cart. Bodi strides back over to us, dusting his hands off on the sides of his trousers, a broad smile on his face as he looks back and forth between us.

"Now who is ready to meet Haith?" he asks.

Kassie shakes her head and pushes me forward. "Too much excitement for me, I think," she murmurs, glancing hopefully toward the cart. "If I can just go get settled, I will be fine back there while you introduce Lynn."

I stare at the traitor as she happily volunteers me as she's carefully led back to the back of the cart by the orc. That deceitful... fibber! She's scared, but not *that* scared. From the cart, she gives me a triumphant smile the moment Bodi turns away and starts back toward me.

I silently groan. *Matchmaking schemer!*

"You know... I don't really need to meet him, either," I tell him when he once again rejoins me.

He tsks, his eyes dancing with amusement as he offers me his hand. "Don't tell me that you're afraid."

"There's nothing wrong with a bit of healthy fear," I rebut, and he chuckles.

"There's nothing for you to be afraid of either. Besides, it is good for him to get to know you, considering."

"Considering what?" I ask, my voice sharpening with suspicion.

He shrugs a bit too nonchalantly. "Considering you will be seated right behind him. It will make him more comfortable with your presence if he

meets you first.”

I stall for time, my eyes darting nervously toward the enormous cat. “Can’t I just sit in the back with Kassie?”

“I only had enough supplies to make a seating area for Kassie. You will be safer up front on the bench seat beside me while the cart is moving.”

I curse quietly as I slap my hand in his, allowing him to draw me over to the cat hitched to the front of the cart. Haith’s nostrils flare, his mouth gaping a little as he breathes in my scent. Holding my hand firmly in Bodi’s, he places our joined hands in front of the feline’s face before moving them to sink into the thick, impossibly soft fur of Haith’s shoulder.

“Haith, this is our Lynn. Lynn, this is my delfass, Haith.”

From the back, I can hear Kassie mutter, “*That’s* a delfass. Scratch one item off that list. One encounter is enough.”

I snicker quietly at her comment, but I’m soon swallowed up in the wonder of touching the powerful, magnificent creature... and the delfass too. The touch of Bodi’s hand in mine causes conflagration of heat to spark within me and as he moves around, our hands together in a stroking motion over Haith’s neck and shoulders, I’m struck by how warm his hand is and how erotic it feels joined with mine, the rough calluses brushing over my skin with every movement.

His hands aren’t those of a lawyer, but of a male who works hard with them and yet still can show the gentlest touch. I want to sigh when he finally releases my hand so that I can pet the delfass on my own. I jerk a bit when the feline’s enormous head turns toward me and affectionately bumps my arm with the strength of a playful punch. I can’t stop the grin that spreads across my face. I’m instantly won over as the delfass begins to purr like an enormous engine, and I bury my cheek against his broad head.

At my side, Bodi shakes his head. “Figure him to be the one to win a female’s attention over me,” he says with a put-upon sigh.

I grin up at the orc. “You get bonus points for this. You have no idea how much I miss my sweet Casper.”

Bodi’s answering smile is broad, hinting of something a lot more intimate, promising things that I know I shouldn’t be thinking of. Damn him for that utterly sexy smile.

CHAPTER 9



LYNN

*B*undled up in my new wool coat, I smile encouragingly at the orc who sniffs curiously at the cup of coffee he holds in his hand.

“It looks like liquid tar... or some bad ink. Are you sure that this is safe to drink?” he mutters.

I feel my smile wobble. Outside of a number of curious glances at my stand, he’s the first to stop and actually try a sample. It’s disheartening as hell, and as none of the human tourists seem to be out milling about yet this morning, I don’t have their enthusiasm to help me out in winning the locals.

“It’s not,” I assure him. “It is a drink made from a special roasted fruit. It’s good.”

“I don’t know,” he mumbles. “It doesn’t smell like any kind of fruit. It smells strange.”

Behind me I can hear Bodi sigh loudly from where he has propped himself lazily against one of the support beams of our shelter.

“Just try it, Kinthrus,” he snaps. “It is not going to poison you.”

I cringe. Why did he have to bring up the word poison? Immediately, this Kinthrus guy looks warier as he lowers his cup and sets it on the table beside me. Shifting on his feet uncomfortably, he rubs the back of his neck as I stare at the cup in dismay.

No, no, no, no!

“Maybe I will come try it later,” he says softly, his voice apologetic. “I just don’t want to chance getting ill before I get some trading done.”

I attempt a friendly smile and nod. “Sure. We’ll be here until the market closes. Feel free to get another sample on your way out.”

As he walks away, though, my smile falls, and I close my eyes against the wave of discouragement washing through me. As I practically drown in that sea of disappointment, a large, warm hand settles on my shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Lynn. Give it a little time and you will have lines waiting for cups of your coffee.”

His words are sweet, but despite his best intentions, he really isn't helping. At all. In fact, it's safe to say that he's making it worse.

"You're a menace," I mutter, bringing my fingers up to rub my temples.

His hand squeezes my shoulder in an attempt to comfort. "Probably telling him that it wasn't poison wasn't the best idea," he mutters.

A short, weak laugh escapes me, and I turn my head to look at him, my eyebrows lifting. "You think?"

"I am sorry, lanara, my Lynn," he says in a quiet, earnest voice.

Chagrin colors his expression, and it's hard to be mad at him when he's looking for all the world apologetic. His smile is slow and sweet, as he gives me a hopeful look. It seems out of place on a grown male orc, but there is something almost endearing about it that I can't even be irritated that he's calling me "his" again. Stupid heart-melting smiles.

I shake my head at him, my lips quirking ruefully. "I should have known it wouldn't be that easy. I guess our game plan just needs a little work." I chew on my bottom lip, thinking. "Kassie should be back soon with... what did you say his name is?"

"Garval, my brother," Bodi reminds me.

"Right, him. Remind me to thank him for taking the time to go with Kassie to get food."

Bodi waves away my thanks. "He was happy to assist. I think my little brother is interested in your friend. He would not want any other to assist her."

My mouth rounds in surprise. "Oh. *Oh*. That's not good."

"I swear, Garval will behave honorably. He's the best male I know. Far better than me, even," he adds with a self-deprecating smile.

I might have analyzed that last bit a little closer except I was still mentally snagged on this new development, and knowing Kassie, she would carry on pleasantly while he mooned over her, having no idea.

"Not that. It's just that," I bite my lip again, unable to think of any kind way to put it. "Kassie is not available. You see that she's pregnant, right?"

Bodi nods. "I have told my brother she is whelping when I asked him to assist her, and he thinks it is wonderful. He likes younglings very much."

“Oh jeez.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. What a disaster in the making. “She already has a man... err, male. She’s married. She can’t be with Garval.”

And a damn shame that is, I can’t help but think. The quiet, shy orc would be a lot better for my friend than that asshole she is married to, but I keep that observation to myself.

Bodi’s eyes widen, and his mouth hangs slack. “How... She can’t be mated!”

I frown at his denial. “I assure you that she is. He’s a bit of a prick, if you ask me, but they are very much together.”

He shakes his head, aghast. “If she is mated, why is he not here keeping watch over her and tending to her while she is whelping?”

“Like I said, he’s a prick,” I say flatly. I sigh and roll my neck to ease some of the tension. “Trust me, it’s nothing against your brother. He just doesn’t have a shot right now, not when she’s determined to do what she thinks is best for her family. Ending a relationship is complicated... I should know,” I add wryly. “I’m sorry.”

“I do not understand this,” he mutters reluctantly as he resumes his place against the support pole and folds his arms over his chest. A heavy sigh leaves him. “I will inform Garval.”

“That’s for the best.” I agree.

His eyes suddenly narrow on me, his gaze shrewd. “You are not mated, are you?”

I choke back a laugh. “Fuck no. I got out of that marital nightmare and have no intention of doing it again. As they say, ‘Been there, done that.’”

“Hmm.” He turns his head away to scan the crowd.

I pick up the cup to dump it out in the small wash area set up behind our table, but then it’s suddenly snatched out of my hand with enough force that I wobble a bit. In a blur of movement, one of Bodi’s big hands grips my shoulder to steady me.

“Sorry, I need this,” he murmurs softly, and just as quickly as he grabbed me, he lets go and disappears into the crowd.

With my cup.

“Bodi,” I shout, “where the hell are you going!?”

My words are swallowed by the noise of the early morning market. I fume for a minute, staring intently among the moving bodies. Flashes of brilliant green and shades of lavender and purple mingle among the

predominant orc population. Huh. There are a surprising number of trolls who have come this morning. And not one of them is looking at my setup.

“Pain in the ass orc,” I grumble under my breath, cleaning up a small spill as I set the metal coffee pot on my makeshift warming plate. “First I can’t get rid of him, and now he just goes and disappears on me.”

Attached to the either side of the metal brazier I brought with me, the warming plates look like they will be getting a workout this morning. I scowl at the cheerful fire dancing in the brazier and mentally work out how long I have before I need to dump out the pot and make up a fresh one. There’s a tiny voice at the back of my mind suggesting once again that all of this may have been a very bad idea. As I have so many times since trying to make the coffee shop a go, I quash that voice ruthlessly.

Andrew may not have given me much of himself during our later years of marriage, but one thing he did gift me with was an unshakeable determination. Once I’ve set my mind on something, I’ll get it. I’m not giving up—or even letting myself even consider it—until I’ve given this week everything I have. I didn’t spend all that time perfecting how to make coffee without electricity to give in to self-defeat now. I just need to think.

What will hook potential customers?

Taking a page from Bodi, I lean against a beam, my eyes drifting over the crowd. I really know nothing about what appeals to fae beings. I tried to do a little research while making a fresh batch of coffee, but since I don’t know any personally, finding information was harder than I had thought it would be. Now I’m coming realize that I seriously underestimated just how different they would be when it comes to what might draw them in. Clearly none of them possess a strong enough curiosity to try it just from the delicious smell of the brew alone.

That’s fair. I know plenty of humans who refuse to try stuff from other cultures just because it looks different than what they’re accustomed to.

My foot begins to tap as ideas come to me only to be discarded. I’m at the point of screaming with frustration when Kassie returns. I get my first real look at Garval. Taller than Bodi and impossibly thick with muscle, the muddy green male shadows her from a distance away. I honestly don’t think she even realizes that he’s been following and protecting her. Even though he never approaches, his eyes track her every movement like a lovesick puppy.

I really hope that Bodi has that talk with him soon.

Kassie sets down packages containing savory cooked meat, spiced cooked vegetables, and bread and looks around curiously.

“Where’s Bodi? I brought enough for him too.”

I scowl and shrug. “Who knows? He took off with one of the cups of coffee about fifteen minutes ago.”

She tips her head with a thoughtful purse of her lips. “Huh. That’s sort of weird.”

“You’re telling me,” I mutter, leaning my head back against the post.

She shakes her head. “Not that. *That*.”

She points to the market entrance and my mouth drops when I see Bodi striding toward us, his head tipped back slightly as he talks animatedly with the centaur beside him. I immediately recognize the blacksmith. If his distinctive coloring hadn’t given him away, the dark streaks of soot over his hands and forearms would have done it.

The centaur strides through the crowd, at least half a head taller than most of the other centaurs I’ve seen. With a coat that is largely iron gray in color, he stands out due to a pretty dappling of white spots on his hindquarters, as if he got caught out in the snow. His humanoid torso is built and muscular, with bronze skin that looks almost human if not for the long, pointed ears peeking out of the curly brown hair that falls halfway down his back. And he’s holding my coffee cup in his hand.

Bodi, I could kiss you. My lips quirk as he turns to look at me with a broad grin on his blue-gray face.

“Umm, has Bodi turned into the pied piper of humans?” Kassie interrupts.

I give her a confused look. “What?”

“Well, they have a whole train of human tourists following after them.”

I crane my head a bit and my jaw goes slack. Sure enough, there are tourists following close after the centaur and orc duo with eager expressions on their faces. I am still staring with disbelief, when the ridiculous male strides over to me and sweeps me up into a bone-crushing hug.

“Look, I brought you company,” he purrs. “Am I forgiven?”

I stare at the small gathering of customers, my smile widening. “Yeah. I would say that you are.”

The centaur's eyes crinkle with amusement, and he hands me the cup in his hand. "This was quite satisfying. Bodi tells me that you have more?"

I nod my head, prying myself out of Bodi's grasp to scoop up the cup. "One copper and I will get you a refill."

He produces the coin, and I hurry off to fix him a cup. As I do so I see several orcs and a couple of trolls look over with interest and start to head my way. Excitement stirs in my blood and I barely resist doing a small jig.

This is it. This is really it! The hook I needed!

A few trolls drift into line behind the humans, and they are joined by the orcs, and eventually other fae trickling in behind them. Even with Bodi and Kassie's help, I can barely keep up between the orders and washing cups clean. It's madness that drags me up with it until my blood is rushing in a rapturous high. By the time midday arrives and the market begins to close, I am exhausted, but it's a happy sort that has me smiling in delight despite my protesting muscles.

Bodi grins over at me. "You look very pleased."

I return his smile and shrug. "This was great. I really owe you one."

He shrugs. "It was my fault that you lost your first customer. I had to do something." He scratches his cheek. "But if you are serious, there is something..."

I arch an eyebrow, wondering what sort of dirty proposition he has running around in that head of his. I might even be intrigued. Might be.

"Are you perhaps interested in coming with me to the Lantern Labyrinth... if you decide to stay? It is a few weeks after the harvest festival, and one of our most beautiful and treasured rites."

I blink in surprise. That's the last thing I expected. He wants... a date.

I glance uncomfortably over at Kassie. I really hadn't decided yet either way. "I don't know..."

My friend gives an encouraging grin and waggles her eyebrows.

"Come on, Lynn, we both know after today you're going to stay," she teases.

I suck in my lips, fighting a smile. She's not wrong. I know it's ridiculous to make a huge career plan on a single day, but I'm excited in a way that I haven't been while struggling to get by with bills mounting up. What's more, despite the hurdles of not having things like electricity, there are gas lamps and piped running water. I'm really enjoying the vibe of the orc village... especially since it's full of orcs who are now developing a

taste for my coffee. Worst case scenario, if things change and I don't make it, I can always go back home. The tidy sum still left in my bank account, and whatever I make from selling mom's shop will be there to help me figure something out.

"Okay," I say slowly. "*If* I stay... why not?"

His answering smile is slow and wide, his sparkling green eyes crinkling at the corners. He looks so pleased that I feel a tickle of happiness inside me. It's absurd that his delight should inspire such a feeling.

CHAPTER 10



I don't think I have ever realized just how isolated and *empty* my cottage feels until right then as I'm standing in the central room, with no sweet feminine scent surrounding me. With my cottage so far outside of the village, I have always found it peaceful, but now I just feel the distance that separates me from Lynn, and I don't like it.

My brother, Garval, eyes me from where he sits on one of the larger chairs, his gaze speculative. Two massive elbows are propped on the armrests, one hand brushing his lap while the other props up his chin.

"You appear... not yourself, brother," he remarks bluntly.

Swiping a hand through my hair, I give him a pinched smile and a humorless chuckle. "You think so? I can't imagine why not? Perhaps it's because my body aches for a female who fills my mind at all moments. A female who isn't the least bit interested in me."

His eyebrow raises. "I seem to recall scenting the opposite."

I wave my hand dismissively. "That matters less for humans than it does for us. While we are perfectly capable of controlling our instincts, they have mastered a talent for outright ignoring theirs. The reaction of her body is a good sign, but it means little."

A grin cracks Garval's solemn face. "I never figured that you would have any trouble when it came to mating. Even when you nearly got yourself killed for courting high ranking daughters in other clans, it was mostly the objections of their fathers you had to worry about."

Dropping onto the soft cushions of the high-backed bench, I scowl at him. "I'm so glad that you are enjoying this. It's not like you have ever lacked female company should you have wanted it."

He shrugs, his smile still in place. "There has never been a female who interested me enough to try—until now."

My stomach drops, and my lips pinch with a grimace at the reminder. "About that..."

Garval's brows draw together, his brown gaze focused on me with a keen intensity. I'm just grateful that my brother is the mellowest of males

in our clan. It means that I'm not going to risk being maimed or beaten for what I'm about to tell him.

"What?" he rumbles, the sound deep, almost verging on aggressive.

"You can't court her," I say quickly.

He draws back as if I had drawn my claws across his face, his gaze accusing. "Why not?" he snarls. "What did you tell her that she doesn't want me courting her?"

I shake my head, my hands coming up in a soothing gesture. "It's not like that," I assure him. "She is just not available. She is mated. I just discovered this today."

His expression goes blank, the intensity in his eyes wavering as he swallows. "Are you sure? Maybe you are mistaken."

I shake my head, my arms dropping down to my side in defeat. "I'm certain. Lynn told me this herself. Kassie is mated with two offspring."

"I see," he murmurs, the full weight of his arms dropping onto the armrests as he leans his head back contemplatively.

"I'm sorry. I had really hoped..." I begin but stop when he rolls his eyes and heaves himself to his feet.

"Do not waste sympathy on me, brother. It seems that my luck does not run to my own desires. Never has."

I sigh as I watch him. I know exactly what he speaks of because I've seen the signs of it ever since I became Master of the Guard. In truth, I've known it all my life, even though I've chosen more often than not to ignore it. Garval is huge, a monster among orcs, the perfect killing machine in battle—and he hates all of it. Even when we were young, Father struggled to get him out onto the training field when my brother was perfectly content spending his time in the kitchen watching our mother work when even Erra fled that task, or stretched out in front of the fire. He is built for battle, but his heart is not that of a warrior.

"Why don't you quit?" I ask quietly. "Leave the guard. No one will condemn you for it."

"Maybe not overtly, but they will still talk," he observes with an ill-humored huff. He cuts a hard gaze toward me. "And what would I do? What skill do I have?"

"You have helped Erra and Gavith a time or two in the tavern."

He waves that aside. "They don't need much help all that often," he mutters. "Besides I have no passion for the fare that they make there. It is

simple and filling, and I enjoy eating it, but cooking it does not make me any happier than what I'm currently doing."

He sighs and settles further into the chair, his eyes fixed on some distant place in his mind. He sits there for a time until he finally rouses himself enough to shake his head, his gaze again focusing on me.

"So how are you planning to proceed with Lynn?" he asks, shifting the conversation away from himself.

I want to press him to share his feelings, but there is a hard, uncompromising look in his eyes. I know that he won't welcome any intrusion. Instead, I shrug.

"I did get her to agree to attend the Lantern Labyrinth with me... if she stays."

"Grand," he drawls. "*If she stays*. And what are you going to do until then? Sit here by yourself, stewing?"

I scowl at him, but he is right. Retreating to my cottage isn't the best way to make use of my time. In fact, hiding out here, indulging in self-pity while I'm racked with uncertainty, is very out of character for me. No wonder my brother showed up on my doorstep.

Garval pushes up to his feet, his eyes narrowing on me. "Get yourself out there, track your female down. It's late to return now, but the games are tomorrow. She will be certain to be there. There is no reason you can't mix work with pleasure when you are out patrolling. My older brother would not be so easily defeated."

I take a deep breath and let it out, something of my old self coming back. I give him a lopsided smile. "You know... you're right."

He huffs. "Of course, I am. The female I want may be out of my reach, but I refuse to watch you destroy your opportunity with yours." He gives me a critical look over his shoulder as he heads toward the door. "A word of advice, try to act normal for once, instead of a lunatic."

I just grin and see him out. Already a plan is in motion in my head. I can't just hope that helping her out will be enough. I need to woo her in truth, and I have the perfect outfit in mind that will undeniably be able to draw her eye. I can't wait. My sweet Lynn is going to be in for a treat.

CHAPTER 11



LYNN

For the hundredth time today, I turn a disbelieving eye on the orc casually leaning against the pole.

“What the hell is he wearing?” I whisper to Kassie.

My friend’s lips suck in like she’s trying to hold back her laughter, and she shakes her head. “It... it is, uh, very eye-catching,” she replies.

“Eye-catching isn’t the word. That outfit is so tight it looks like it belongs on a professional ballet dancer!” I hiss. “You can see everything.”

Quite literally.

And fuck, what a sight it is. I thought his pants were tight before. These appear almost sculpted to him, the bulge of his cock beautifully defined in the deep lavender-gray fabric. The tunic isn’t much better. A bold salmon pink, the tunic clings like a second skin to every bulging muscle, and possesses a shorter cut, terminating at his hip line so there’s nothing at all to even partially hide the outline of his dick or the incredible curve of his ass.

It is both impressive and horrific. Horrific because I can’t seem to keep from looking at him and because I know I’m not the only one who’s impressed. More than one female, whether human, orc, or other, has lingered to admire him. And time and time again, I’m forced to watch it. I grit my teeth as one female—a nymph I believe—smiles, her eyes skimming over him with heated interest. I’m certain that she’s about to proposition him, but I’m surprised when she suddenly glances at me in a knowing fashion and winks before continuing on her way.

Worse, Bodi seems completely clueless. His eyes, when not scanning the crowd for possible threats, are always on me. It’s like he’s watching for a reaction, and that’s even more maddening. What? Does he want to see me freak out on some innocent female who’s looking at exactly what he’s putting on display? I feel like I’m being toyed with and just want to stab him with something. Not to hurt him, but rather to tear numerous tiny holes into those clothes to vent my frustration.

Thank the gods that the market is over and I can pack my shit up before I end up exploding. Whether that is exploding in lust or just

maddening fury I can't quite decide. I debate the matter as I put away the last of the cups.

A couple of women pause, one fanning herself, as they watch him pick up an enormous crate of supplies, their eyes skimming over every inch of corded strength, giggling between themselves.

"Can they be any more obvious?" Kassie whispers. "I mean, yeah, okay, they're on vacation, but come on. Someone needs to mop up their drool. Everyone's going to think earth girls are easy."

My lips quirk at her observation. "And we aren't? I think someone tried to prove that in a movie once," I manage to tease.

Kassie suddenly laughs, her expression incredulous. "Are you really trying to use *that* movie as a reference for human behavior?"

I shrug and grin, relaxing into our familiar banter. "Hey, if it can happen with aliens, why not with fae?" I reply, my eyebrows rising in challenge. "You're also forgetting how popular monster erotica and romances are. But you of all people should be familiar with that one. I've seen your bookshelf."

She groans, her face turning as red as a tomato. "Jeez, you just had to bring that up. Okay, guilty as charged. You know I love those romances, but that doesn't make me ready to... oh my gods." She gapes.

My mouth drops open as well and I inwardly seethe when one of the women begins to reach for Bodi's ass as he bends. Thankfully her friend stops her before she can make contact, grabbing ahold of her hand and yanking it away with a nervous giggle.

"Holy shit. Please tell me I didn't just see that."

"Oh, you saw it all right," I mutter with a shake of my head. "Reminds me of all the badly behaving women who try to see up kilts during Ren Faires. They would be pissed if guys were doing that to them, but somehow this strikes them as okay because his pants are molded to his ass."

"More like painted on," Kassie whispers with a gurgle of laughter and a flash of amusement cutting through my anger. She tilts her head. "I wonder if they're drunk."

"Who fucking cares?" I grumble, my amusement crumbling to ash as I place the last mug in its crate. "We're done. Let's get the fuck out of here." Raising my voice, I shout over to Bodi. "I'm done! Let's get going."

He nods and quickly strides over to scoop up Kassie, lifting her effortlessly into the back of the cart. He looks over at me, but I set my jaw, refusing to give him the pleasure of a reaction as I walk stiffly up to the front of the cart. Haith's neck curves as he looks back at me, and I give his shoulder a pat and break out into a smile when his large head presses against my chest with the weight of a boulder. I scratch behind his dark ears while Bodi loads the last of the stuff. With the last item packed away into the cart, he gives me a triumphant grin and heads toward me at an easy lope.

I swear that I hear someone sigh, and my jaw clenches so hard that it's a miracle I don't crack any teeth.

I don't want to look over at him when he hauls himself into the cart, but I can't seem to help that my eyes are drawn to him.

"Seems that you did another good day of business," he says, a proud smile spreading over his face as he gives Haith the command to go.

I swallow and nod, pushing my frustration to the back of my mind. I know I'm overreacting and acting crazy. He's always so sweet to me. Maybe that's why I'm feeling so insanely jealous. I've been enjoying that attention. Still, my sudden territoriality surprises me.

"Yeah, it was pretty good. Even better than yesterday," I admit, a reluctant smile pulling at my lips. I can feel the tension starting to drain from me as we put distance between ourselves and the market. *And those women.* "Things got off to a really good start today and kept going strong with few lulls."

He nods, slanting me a quick, admiring look that completely disarms me. "I noticed. And so did Orgath. You were too busy, so you probably didn't see him, but he came through the market with a few of the guard and passed by. He appeared to be quite impressed," he confided, his smile broadening.

My heart stutters before a sense of triumph spreads through my veins like the blissful warmth from a long sip of fine wine. If the rest of the week goes like this, getting approval for my café should be a piece of cake.

Fudgy cake. Damn, I miss cake already. I either need to kidnap a baker or figure out how to make a few things myself. I make a mental note to grab some supplies to try my hand at a few simple recipes that I might be

able to teach someone in a pinch if I manage to hire anybody else. Cakes, donuts, and pastries are going to be a must!

Bodi makes a few more amusing observations regarding the crowd we had during the short drive back to the cottage, and by the time we arrive, most of my irritation has fled. That is, until he jumps out of the cart to help us down and I get another eyeful of what he's going to be wearing for the rest of the day while he's working.

I bite my tongue and give him what I hope to be a convincingly sweet smile before looping my arm with Kassie's and half-dragging her up the short walkway to the door. I can feel Bodi's eyes tracking me and try not to duck my head in complete humiliation as I attempt to regulate my speed so it doesn't seem like I'm running from him. I'm still walking fast enough though, however, that she's nearly breathless with laughter by the time we get inside and the door is shut securely behind us.

I lean against the door, my ears straining as I listen, making sure that he's not going to trail after to us to the door. I'm strangely disappointed when I hear the cart pull away. Straightening, I walk away from the door, pulling off my coat.

"You have one hour to get changed into something fresh and fun, and then we're going back," Kassie sings as she waddles over to her room.

"I hope it's better than the dancing we did last night!" I shout back over at her.

She pokes her head back through her doorway. "Oh, come on, that was fun! How often do you get to say that you had the opportunity to learn traditional harvest festival dances from orcs?"

"I can count on one hand how often anything of the like has *ever* come up in conversation," I reply, starting for the stairs. "Between getting my toes stepped on by the guy I was paired with and an embarrassing lack of muscle to pull off some of the moves those females can, I think I can safely say I will never be putting that lesson to use."

"It was still fun," Kassie sings after me.

It would have been more fun if Bodi had been there, I silently admit. Goofy and infuriating as he is, I know that he wouldn't have made me feel self-conscious. I bet with the graceful, feline way that he moves, he's a great dancer.

Stripping off my clothes, I wash up a bit with some cool water and a rag before pulling on a clean blue wool skirt and a tunic a couple of shades

lighter. I run a brush through my short hair and debate putting some product in it to style it before settling on just leaving it alone in its shaggy, flyaway look it's adopted.

Maybe I will grow it out. Another departure from my old life where the pixie cut emphasized my slim frame and the line of my neck... or so I had been told by the stylist. The thought of growing it back out so that I can put it up into a messy bun again like I did in college, or a half-assed braid, makes me smile.

With one last inspection in the mirror, I skip back down the stairs about the same time Kassie comes out of her room clad a bright orange skirt and a fuchsia sweater. I blink at her, surprised that the combo works on her and doesn't clash with her auburn hair, the curls tied back with an orange scarf that matches her skirt. It's a bit bright, but there is no denying that it's certainly festive.

"So are we going for *It's the Great Pumpkin*, or *Happy Valentine's Day*, *Charlie Brown*?" I tease, throwing one arm around her.

She sticks her tongue out at me. "Hush, this is one of my favorite nicer outfits... one that still fits," she adds, her hand smoothing over her rounded belly.

"I'm just teasing. You look beautiful."

"You do too. I always knew you clean up nice, but that is so much better than anything I've seen you in," she says, her smile wide.

"Well, since we're both looking fine as hell, let's get out to the party. I can't believe that they went through all the work of pulling down the market just to put a fair up tonight." I shake my head in mild disbelief of all the work and effort that must have taken.

Whatever amount of work, the results are incredible. When we enter the square, all traces of the busy marketplace are gone, replaced with a jubilant festive atmosphere. There's a kennel with strangely horrifying reptilian canines yipping and hissing excitedly as a troll stands guard over them. Their bodies wriggle just like puppies despite their sharp faces, red and black scale coloring, and the monstrous teeth already evident in their long, narrow, too-small muzzles. They look like adorable versions of something straight out of *Hellraiser*. Long whip-like tails wag as they scramble over each other, making them appear almost comical rather than frightening.

Just to the other side, not to be outdone, is an olive green goblin with a thatch of unruly brown hair. He holds up a griffin hatchling, its tiny claws curling around his long, fingers. I pause for a moment, admiring the bold cream and black coloring of its feathers and the red feathers that frame its ears like adorable puffs. The griffin chirps and the goblin, seeing my interest, grins.

“Best griffins in this part of Ov’Gorg! Great guards, or if you have a mind to train them as mounts, they are strong beasts.”

“I would not advise that,” a deep voice murmurs, startling me.

A familiar deep green orc stands next to me, his massive arms folded over his chest as he glares over at the goblin. His eyes cut over to me, even if he seems to be avoiding looking in Kassie’s direction. She’s still looking at the strange dog-like creatures, oblivious to what is happening over here. I’m willing to bet all the coffee in my cottage that Bodi broke the news to him. I know he did when, a moment later, Garval steals a glance at Kassie and swallows thickly before brusquely turning away from her.

My heart squeezes with sympathy, but I’m just glad that it got nipped in the bud. It’s a shame too, because I have a feeling that this big, protective orc could be so much better for my friend. It seems that he’s determined to do what needs to be done, though. Instead of staring after Kassie like a lovesick puppy whose affections can’t be returned, he is glowering at the goblin who grins unabashedly back at him.

“I believe Orgath told you that you can’t sell griffins here,” he growled. “They are fine for those who know what they’re doing, but not in the general population.”

The goblin gives an aggravated sigh and jabs a thumb toward the troll. “How come he can sell mawu pups? Shouldn’t there be rules about that too?”

“There are, and I will be speaking to him next. We have been lenient in the past, but not when we have humans present who can be easily injured by these animals should they purchase one.”

The goblin harrumphs but nods as he dons a large, wide sack, pulling the strap across his chest so that the bag hangs at one side. Carefully, he tucks the hatchling into it before scooping up another. Garval grunts with satisfaction and looks down at me.

“I would give those selling animals a wide berth until you have been here a while,” he suggests in a mild voice, all of his previous aggression

gone as if it had been an illusion. “Once you get settled, I’m certain my brother would be delighted to help you pick out a companion should you choose one.”

I laugh, nervously side-eyeing the very last griffin before it too disappears into the sack. “Good advice. I think Casper is enough for me right now.”

“Casper?” He tilts his head with curiosity.

“My cat,” I elaborate. “Like a delfass but tiny.” I demonstrate his approximate size with my hands, and the orc snorts with amusement.

“And it’s a kit?”

“Nope, grown.”

He shakes his head as if he can’t fathom such a thing. “How are they of any use?”

I quietly laugh at his bewilderment. “Well, he’s a very affectionate companion, and good at getting rid of mice.”

Garval’s expression becomes contemplative, and he nods. “I can see how that might be useful. I hope to meet your Casper, then. Now if you will excuse me, I must attend to the matter of the troll’s mawu, if you can attract the attention of your friend.”

The stress on the last word, breaks my heart just a little for him but I nod. The look he gives me is grateful, and when he begins to lumber off, I shout over to Kassie, snagging ahold of her attention. There is a distinct warm, fruity scent in the air that I keep catching snatches of that’s returned and I know immediately how to tempt her away.

“Kassie, come on. I smell pie. Didn’t you say something about wanting to enter a contest?”

She brightens and hurries over to my side, casting only a curious glance toward Garval on her way over. Wrapping her arm around mine, she nudges me playfully. She drags in a deep breath and moans so loudly that behind her I can see Garval stiffen as if someone shoved a rod up his spine. I giggle despite myself and squeeze her arm with mine.

“That smells so good,” she sighs. “I could really use some pie.”

The sweet, seductive smell of blackberries teases my nose, mingling with the sweet-tart smell of cherries. She’s right. It does smell good.

“You know something? I think I could too. Let’s go see about getting into that contest.”

With her delighted squeal in my ear, we walk through the fair, delighting in the confections goblins are selling everywhere, the sugary smells this time making me moan with fond memories of childhood. A flash of fire and a puff of smoke draw my attention to an illusionist mage delighting the crowd, and game booths are set up everywhere throughout the market. Like any fair, there's the chaotic sound of things toppling over, the snap of projectiles being thrown, and the noisy laughter and conversation of children and adults alike, regardless of the species. Someone in the near distance controls some sort of levitation magic that has children and adults bobbing in the air as they spin, somersault and dive, their safety harnesses keeping them firmly tethered to the ground.

There are also surprisingly normal things, such as a giant slide set at one side of the square. Even the equivalent of a dog pull, except that it's juvenile delfass pulling people at wicked speeds. I can only just barely see them every now and then from a distance, but it looks fun.

The most endearing thing, however, is the train of large fluffy critters that resemble rodents in the face, despite their cloven hooves, and the puffy tails of chinchillas. About the size of a large Shetland pony, they vary in hues of tan and gray and are tied together in a long line with a rope leading from one harness to another. On their backs, all manner of children cling with delight, wearing broad smiles.

Kassie and I watch them trail by.

"You know," she says, "I really wish I could have come to *this* fair when I was a kid. Despite the lack of mechanical rides, I kinda feel cheated now."

"Same," I murmur, my eyes settling on a sight that makes my heart pump with quickening beats as lust and ire war with one another.

Bodi smiles at me in a way that makes me squirm from the pure heat that crosses the space between us until Kassie, having spotted the pie eating contest, pulls me forward eagerly. I turn my head to look back at him over my shoulder, but he's gone, swallowed up in the crowd again.

And of course, he's still wearing those damn clothes, just as I knew he would be.

CHAPTER 12



BODI

For just a moment the crowd had parted long enough to give me a glimpse of my Lynn before the gap closed and swallowed her up again. I growl with frustration as I crane my neck, attempting to peer through the crowd.

“Don’t hurt yourself, Bodi,” Garval says wryly from behind me. “I believe I heard them mention pies as they were leaving the gryphon paddock.”

My heart chills and I glance over at him. “Griffin paddock,” I hiss. “No one got hurt, I hope.” Even a scratch on my Lynn would be intolerable to me.

Garval stares down at me with amusement but shakes his head. “No injuries. I was able to cut the goblin off before he could even begin to tempt your female with a hatchling. More than one human was enamored with a mawu, however, and I had to threaten the troll with bodily harm for him to refund the buyers and take the pups back.”

I swipe a hand over my face and groan. “That is one disaster averted. We need to become a lot stricter during times when we have humans present. The mawu and griffin breeders will have to understand.”

“They will. Once I explained the rules, I had little argument over the matter.”

“Good,” I mutter, trying to recall what else he’d said.

He pauses for a moment, his eyes narrowing as he takes a good look at me. I puff out my chest, smoothing the silky fabric of my tunic that he’s no doubt admiring. It cost me a small fortune and I’ve been saving it for a special occasion. As far as I am concerned, there is none better than this—wooing my mate. His lips twitch, and he shakes his head.

“You thought it was a good idea to wear that, did you?” he rumbles, amusement heavy in his voice.

I’m actually affronted as I stare back at him, my brow furrowing. “Yes. It is my best outfit.” When he continues to stare at me, I glance down at myself. “What’s wrong with it?”

His eyebrows rise, and a broad grin spreads across his face. “Not a thing if you are wishing to advertise your every blessing that the gods gifted you with to anyone who has eyes in their head.”

I stare at him, perplexed. “Of course. I want my female to be able to clearly see what she’s getting. I had intended this to be my mating day outfit when I purchased it, but I think courting her properly is of greater importance right now. It is very flattering, something females greatly enjoy. I’ve been assured as much by the goblin tailor.”

“I see,” my foolish brother murmurs, looking not at all convinced.

I huff in irritation. What does he know about fashion, anyway? Goblins are at the height of such things, tailoring even for the high elves. I straighten my hem as I glare off into the crowd.

“Where did you say they went again?”

My brother smirks and points in the direction I had caught a glimpse of my female. “The pie eating contest. I believe that they are going to join so to enjoy the pie. Kassie seemed particularly eager.”

He chuckles for a moment and then chokes on it, his expression growing bleak as if recalling once more how he can’t have her. It’s surely some cruel jest, by one god or another, to have my younger brother feel such attachment to a female who’s already mated. I grip his arm firmly and give it a reassuring squeeze.

“Thank you, brother,” I say quietly before releasing him to slip into the crowd.

Despite the large turnout for the fair clogging the square, it doesn’t take me long to arrive at the long table set up for the pie eating contest. Now that I know where she was heading, I know exactly where to go. I had supervised the set up for this game as well as several others on this side of the square over the last hour.

I am excited to see her and breathe in her sweet fragrance, but when I arrive, pushing my way past a collection of orcs and humans crowded close to the event, a cold wave of fury crashes over me the moment I set eyes on my female. While Kassie sits to the right of my Lynn, on her left sits a male who I hadn’t wanted to see within two feet of her since our last confrontation.

Fellek.

The male leans toward her, his head dipping low as he rumbles something too low for me to hear. Whatever it is, it makes my female

laugh in a way that has me bristling with aggression.

I don't even think. I react.

In three ground-eating strides, I slide in just behind them. The flag is raised, preparing to start the competition. He leans over to touch the back of her hand as she begins to scoop up her first bite of pie. My skin prickles and my hand shoots forward, twisting in his thick mane of dark hair, yanking his head back savagely. He bellows, his arms flailing, and my Lynn nearly falls off of her chair from turning around so fast, her mouth gaping in horror back at me.

I know this looks uncivilized, but I can't help it. Everything in me protested the male being anywhere near her and her food. It was too much like the bonding rituals in which one fed their mate. Too close. My instinctive reaction was not unwarranted, and not one among my clan would fault me for it. Unfortunately, dozens of human eyes stare at me from the crowd as if I'm a monster, forcing me to swallow back my fury before I carry out the full weight of vengeance against a male approaching what is mine. There are few things that will make an orc lose control, but when it comes to our mates, we are relentless in our savagery.

It is the alarmed expression on my mate's face that makes me relax my grip. Fellek growls but does not dare to move against me. He is built as solidly as any orc of our clan, but he knows he has no chance of winning against me. Leaning forward, I speak low into his ear.

"Do not touch her," I growl. "Attempt such a thing again, and I will not be held responsible for what I do to you."

"You would threaten me... over a human?" he snarls.

"I would protect any human visitor to our realm," I confirm, "but I will kill for her, for my mate."

He blinks slowly, his eyes narrowing with hatred. "She is not your mate. I do not scent you on her."

I grin humorlessly, baring my tusks in a wicked grimace. "Not yet, she isn't. But she will be."

Growling, he twists out of my loose grip and stands, overturning his pie in the process. His eyes snap over to Lynn for only a moment, but at my warning snarl he stiffens and steps back away from the table. He nods to the judge, his expression perfectly neutral.

"On second thought, I think I will pass on this contest." With all the dignity he can muster, he leaves. I watch after him, the smallest of smiles

pulling at my lips.

It is not often a male can enjoy such satisfaction. I wave away a troll who brings another pie and shake my head. I'm not interested in eating and still have my rounds to do. I just want to enjoy some time with my female.

The troll eyes me and exchanges a look with the judge who waves him off impatiently.

"Are you happy now?" My Lynn hisses at me like an angry delfass kit.

And her side, Kassie peers around her with wide eyes.

I give my female an enigmatic smile as the judge raises the flag again. He gives me an impatient look. "Now are we ready?"

I nod and the flag swooshes down, beginning the competition.

Lynn picks up her spoon from where she dropped it in the pie pan and scoops up another bite. A strange scent fills my nose as the fruit nears her mouth. I've enjoyed my share of blackberry pies since my youth, and the sour note clinging to it makes my stomach twist. It is clearly too subtle for the human nose because Lynn doesn't notice anything amiss as she takes a bite. My nostrils flare, alarm rising within me though I can't name the source. She takes another bite, and then another, my strange anxiety mounting until something in my brain clicks. *That terrible smell! It is somehow tainted!* I slap the spoon out of her hand with enough force to send it flying before she can take another bite and haul her off her chair.

My female shrieks and thrashes, and I can hear humans shouting in panic, but it's nothing compared to the frantic worry filling me. Unable to break from my iron grip, Lynn picks up her pie and smashes it all over my front, surprising me enough to loosen my grip so that she can break free. I blink at her, swiping a hand through the deep purple fruit, the stain rapidly spreading over my expensive tunic and dripping down on my best breeches. I don't even care about them though; my mind is filled only with the need to get to her. I rise and step toward her, stilling when she stumbles back, staring at me in betrayal.

I hate seeing that look on her face, her eyes wide with fear and reproach, but I can't let it stop me from doing what must be done. There's no time to lose. No time to stop and explain or attempt to cajole. This is about her life, and I refuse to risk that!

Ignoring the mess covering me, I stride toward her in two quick steps, jerking her up into my arms. She tries to scream and so I take the

opportunity to push my finger down deep into her throat.

“Forgive me,” I whisper as I ruthlessly make her gag.

Her body heaves and she vomits, spewing hot purple bile and bits of pie down the front of me. I grimace but remove my finger, steadying her with one hand as I peer into her eyes. Her glare is murderous, and she slaps my hand away before spinning away and stalking into the crowd. Kassie throws me a worried look before trailing after her.

With a murmured apology to the judge and those staring at me with disgust, I follow after my mate. I know that I’m the last person she wants to see, and that there is a strong likelihood that she will not even wish to speak to me. She may even request that I be replaced as her guard, and my heart seizes at the thought. It would be smart to give her space, but still the worry nags at me. I can’t rest until I have assured myself that she’s okay. My dread is realized when I hear a panicked shout and a feminine voice scream my name.

Shoving my way through the crowd, I break through, my eyes widening in horror as I see my Lynn crumpled on the ground, her face pale and drawn. Kassie leans over her, tears streaking her cheeks, her gaze frantic as it whips around, searchingly, until it lands on me. She scrambles to her feet as quickly as she can while I rush to their side. My knees give out, and I crash painfully onto them at my mate’s side, my hands brushing worriedly over her.

“Please, Bodi, is she going to be okay?” Kassie hiccups, her voice watery with tears.

“I will make sure of it,” I promise, my voice tremulous.

Dragging my female into my arms, I push up once more onto my feet to stride through the crowd. I can feel Kassie attempting to follow, and I bark out an order to a guard watching me with concern.

“Accompany the female following me to the healer. I’m heading there now with her friend.”

Jerking his head in a nod, he heads over toward Kassie. I can distantly hear the murmur of voices and her soft sobs. I block it all out, my concern for my mate overriding everything as I carry her through the crowd to the one person I know who can help her.

CHAPTER 13



LYNN

My head is pounding when I come to, making the muffled voices in the background painfully loud. I'm distantly aware of the fact that I must have fainted. As I had walked through the square, furious with Bodi's strange, interfering behavior, I had gradually begun to feel sick and by increments worse the further I walked. Feeling my body give out had been one of the most frightening experiences of my life, but waking up in a strange place is pretty high on the list too.

My heart racing, I look around the room. Kassie sits in a chair beside the bed, her face pinched with tension. Seeing that I'm awake, she stands and moves closer to the bed to take my hand in hers.

"Hey," she whispers. "How are you feeling?"

I lick my lips, grimacing at the taste of bile in my mouth. My tongue and throat feel dry and faintly sticky. My muscles also strangely ache as if I've been in bed with the flu.

"Like hell," I croak. "How long have I been out?"

She brushes back the hair sticking to my face, making me aware of the sticky film of dry sweat covering my body. "All night. Bodi hasn't left your side other than to argue with the healer."

She casts a wry look to a point beyond my field of vision and the growling conversation halts. Two heavy sets of footsteps approach, and Bodi and another heavily tattooed male who I don't recognize come into view. Lines of stress are evident on Bodi's face as he gazes down at me, his eyes filled with noticeable relief.

"Good, you are awake," the other male sighs with a pleased sigh. "I'm glad to see that I got the dosage right." His gaze shines with interest. "I have never treated a human before and so it was a lot of estimated guesswork, especially since your human physiology apparently has such an unusually strong reaction to the asharval mushrooms."

"Asharval mushrooms?" I whisper, my brow furrowing. "I didn't eat any mushrooms."

A surprisingly gentle smile creases the male's broad face. "It is likely whoever prepared it handled the mushrooms and there was some cross-contamination. Not enough to affect an orc worse than an upset stomach, but it seems it was enough to make you extremely ill."

Bodi turns a wary scowl on him. "Are you certain, Healer Narik?"

Ah, a healer. That makes sense. The tattoos covering half of his face and disappearing into his tunic only to emerge again on his arm are surprising compared to the facial tattoos I've seen on some of the orcs, but maybe they have to do with his station.

The healer nods and rolls his shoulders in a lazy stretch. "That would be my best guess. No one else got sick, but she was also the only human other than her friend who was competing." His eyes crinkle with amusement. "That alone is impressive considering you were going against orcs."

I shrug and give him a weak smile. "Neither of us had any hope of winning. We were just there for the pie experience."

He chuckles and lightly takes my wrist in his hand, checking my pulse. After a minute, he nods and carefully releases me.

"I suppose I can understand that," he agrees pleasantly.

"I could smell the taint," Bodi argues. "How did this get by unnoticed?"

"All of the pies were likely cross-contaminated, just not enough to affect any of the orcs present. It is possible that the others did not notice the subtle scent. You have dealt with various toxins as a warrior in your time, but not everyone in the clans have the knowledge to recognize what they're smelling. It is also possible that the toxins did not distribute evenly among the individual pies, and she was just unlucky enough to get a slightly larger dose. It's a shame there are no remaining pies to take samples from." He sighs. "Thankfully, since no other humans ate the pie, we mercifully avoided a mass illness among them."

Bodi grunts but still doesn't look entirely convinced. The explanation makes sense to me though. There's no telling just how many differences there are between our bodies, especially with orcs being overall larger and sturdier. It would make sense that they're resistant to certain things that would make a human sick.

"Well, that sucks for me, but I'm glad that no one else got sick." I laugh weakly. "I guess someone better pass the message along so that you

don't run into that problem again."

The healer nods. "I will be making a report to the chieftain about it. It is something that must be considered in the future, that we need to take extra care with any foods that humans are going to consume because of your... ah, sensitivities."

"I will discuss it with him as well, rest assured," Bodi growls. He gives the healer an impatient look. "Is she well enough to assist back to her cottage?"

The male nods. "I would suggest that she spend the day resting as much as possible, but I do not see any reason for her not to return home." The look he gives me is apologetic. "I'm afraid you're going to feel pretty weak and uncomfortable for the next twenty-four hours."

"I will see to it that she is taken care of. I've already informed the chieftain that I will be indisposed until she makes a full recovery."

I look over at Bodi in surprise, but Kassie squeezes my hand and mouths, "*I told you so.*"

My tummy flips in a not altogether unpleasant way at the thought of having Bodi tending to my needs. That immediately takes my brain in some smutty directions that it shouldn't be going right now. I'm not in any shape to even pretend to enjoy them.

I groan as the full weight of the healer's instructions crashes down on me. A day in bed? What the hell am I going to do from there?

"Fuck, I'm sorry, Kassie. We only have a few days left here and I go and get sick." I wince. It would naturally have to be my dumb luck to ruin our trip this way. "I guess it's a good thing that things worked out the way they did. If Bodi hadn't pissed me off, you might have eaten it too."

Kassie pales and shivers, her hand protectively cupping her belly. "I was just about to, too. I got a bit distracted by everything that I didn't even notice we had started until you had already taken a few bites. I was just about to take my first bite when everything happened."

Healer Narik frowns over at us. "That is very fortunate. There is no telling what the contamination would have done to your offspring."

"But it didn't," I remind Kassie, whose lip begins to tremble. "So it doesn't bear thinking about. I may be out of commission today, but you can still explore and find something fun to do. We still have time."

Blinking rapidly to chase back tears, Kassie gives me a watery smile and nods.

“I think that is an excellent idea,” Narik approves. “The fair is still ongoing tonight. Stick to the goblin made treats as they don’t use the mushrooms and focus on enjoying yourself.”

Kassie gives me a skeptical look. “I don’t want to just abandon you at the cottage, are you sure you won’t mind?”

I wave off her objection. “Don’t be silly. I’m not going to be great company tonight, and I’ll have Bodi mother-henning over me.”

“It’s a specialty of mine,” Bodi assures her, with a wink, once again earning my gratitude. His green eyes look down at me and soften as leans down and scoops me up into his arms. “Now let’s get you home and into bed.”

As he tucks me in against the warm, broad expanse of his muscular chest, I tip my head back and bite back my laughter.

“Just so you know, that sounds really dirty.”

He grins down at me, more than a little flirtatious. “And that just gives you something to look forward to then, should you be interested.”

A weak laugh bursts from me, and I almost choke on it, giving him a glare as my aching stomach protests. I thump his chest with one hand, having little doubt that he barely felt the tap with all that thick muscle.

“No making me laugh. It hurts.”

Kassie snickers at his side as we leave the healer and step out in the early morning light. We are met with a few curious looks from those who are setting up shop, but no one approaches us until we are nearly out of the square.

We are nearly at the entrance when the blacksmith emerges from his shop, his tail flicking against his hindquarters. His expression is grim as he looks me over.

“I heard that you were ill,” he greets me, his sharp gaze narrowing on me as if ascertaining for himself that I’m okay. He grunts and nods. “I am glad to see that you are recovering.”

“Thank you, uh...” I flush with embarrassment. “I’m sorry, I never got your name.”

“Merik,” he supplies, the corner of one mouth lifting just enough to crease his cheek with a faint dimple.

“Thank you, Merik. I’m feeling like hell but definitely better than I was,” I assure him. “Bodi is just taking me home now.”

The centaur nods. "I figured as much. I suppose you will not be offering coffees today." A look of disappointment flashes across his face before he catches himself and his expression turns apologetic. "Not that you should when you have been ill," he amends quickly.

"Don't worry, I will be back to it soon," I assure him.

Merik's tail flicks again, his expression verging on uncomfortable. "Forgive me if this is rude, but I have heard rumors that you are settling here to sell your coffees. Is this true?"

I nod happily. "Yes. I think that things are going well enough that I'd like to move forward with that plan."

A look of relief crosses his face very briefly before his expression settles back into polite stoicism.

"I will leave you to your recovery then. I'm pleased that you will be joining the village and look forward to many more coffees in the future," he says as he backs away to return to his work, his hand raising in farewell. "I will see you later in regards to your order, Bodi!" he calls out over his shoulder.

Bodi grunts in agreement. "I will speak to you tomorrow," he replies as he carries me past the smithy and out of the square.

CHAPTER 14



Sitting in the chair opposite my mate, I quietly scrutinize her, assuring myself once again that she is indeed beginning to feel better. As the day wears on from early morning to midday, I can see signs of her humor beginning to return. I am pleased to see it, even, if she has been pleasant enough company. The idea of my mate being sick is far too distressing regardless of how well she handles it.

While Lynn is not exactly sweet while she is ill, she could be considered close to it when compared to orcs I've had little choice but to tend to in the past. Of course, it could just be the fact that I am caring for my female that colors my impression, but I am fairly certain that my mate doesn't have the capability of being as foul tempered as an orc.

In any case, I am enjoying our quiet time alone. Kassie was kind enough to look after her while I returned to the keep to fetch Haith. Although he has stable attendants who would have continued to care for him there, I had wanted to return to my cottage to wash myself and put on clean clothing before returning to Lynn so that she wouldn't be surrounded by evidence of her sickness.

Not that I enjoy the smell of vomit, but I have smelled worse things by far over the years. Foremost in my mind is my concern for her. That my best suit is waiting to be disposed of since nothing will remove those unholy stains is a small matter in the scheme of things. The most important thing right now is that my Lynn is comfortable and not besieged with bad feelings. Except for guilt, it seems. For whatever reason, my female is distressed by the idea of not accompanying her friend to the festivities.

"Maybe I should come with," Lynn murmurs for the third time from where she sits, her fingers twitching on the quilt lying over her lap.

I frown down at the blonde hair on her head in disapproval. "You are not to move," I growl. "The healer was clear with his instructions."

She shoots me an irritated scowl, but I don't give quarter. When it comes to her health and welfare, I can be more stubborn than she can even comprehend.

“It’s okay,” Kassie says, tugging her hair out from beneath the collar of her coat. “I’m just going on a cart ride with a bunch of other tourists to get a look at some of the territory. We’ll be stopping at a cider house to enjoy hot drinks and see some of the wildlife around here.”

Lynn’s eyebrows fly up. “That doesn’t sound too strenuous. Maybe I can...”

“No,” I interrupt. “Resting and recovering is what you’ll be doing. And that is all you’ll be doing.”

If looks could kill I would be, at minimum, severely maimed. Luckily, I’ve been maimed to one degree or another many times and so I’m not the least bit cowed by her ferocity. I return her glare with a hard, uncompromising look of my own until she relents.

“What a colossal dick,” she fumes.

Taken off-guard by the sudden shift in conversation, I look down at the front of my breeches speculatively. I have always been generously endowed, but I don’t understand why this suddenly displeases her or what it has to do with the conversation at hand, so I just shrug. “Thank you?”

Promptly, she swipes a hand over her face and groans. “Oh my god.”

Kassie’s grin widens at my female’s sound of exaggerated distress. It is only because it is obviously exaggerated that I don’t immediately attempt to shield Lynn from her friend’s amusement. I think I may even hear a hint of laughter in those three little words, and that just confuses me more than ever.

Human females are strange. It’s rather refreshing. No wonder Orgath enjoys his mate so.

“Bodi is right,” Kassie finally says, surprising me all over again. “You really should remain here and rest.” A self-conscious look crosses her face. “I don’t mind staying behind, though. We can have a quiet girls’ night at home.”

My female grimaces and shakes her head, waving her off. “No, go on ahead. It’s bad enough one of us is going to be stuck here. I don’t want you to be as well. I’ll have Bodi to order around if I need anything. You’ll just have to tell me all about it when you get back.”

Her friend’s lips quirk. “Well, I can do better than that. I have an old-fashioned camera and plenty of film. I have taken a few photos around here when I’ve been unable to sleep but didn’t want to haul it along while

we've been working, shopping, or really anything where I would have to lug it around," she laughs.

Lynn raises her eyebrows. "Film? Really?"

Kassie nods. "Yep. I didn't have to hunt very hard to acquire them. Film cameras have made a huge comeback since the portals have opened up and digital cameras don't work here. Anyway, I'll take lots of pictures so you don't feel like you'll miss out much."

Lynn makes a small click in the back of her throat but, after a moment, begrudgingly sighs. "Oh, okay. I will put myself at this orc's mercy then while you're gone. But expect plenty of pictures out of it."

Kassie, hauling a small bag over her shoulder, raises her hand, flicking her fingers from her brow in a cocky salute. "I better get going so I'm not late meeting the group in the square. I will be back later this evening. I believe there are plans to watch the sunset from Stronghold hill where we can get a bird's eye view of the territory and do some star gazing!" She bounces a bit in place, barely able to curtail her excitement before hurrying to the door. "I hear the night skies are incredible here. I can't wait to see."

"Okay, but pictures!" Lynn shouts after her as the small female makes her escape. Lynn settles back into her chair with a grumble as the door slams. "Don't mind me while I just sit here and die from boredom."

I grin down at her and make a mental note to take her to Stronghold Hill in the future. I can't think of anything I would like more than sharing that moment with her... alone. Right now, we can just enjoy a cozy evening here. As if it will be boring. Not at all! At least not for me. Finally, we are alone! I only wish that she was feeling better so I could take better advantage of my good fortune. I will not seduce my mate when she is sick.

Easing closer to her, I set a hand on the back of the chair. "Is there anything that you need?"

Lynn gives me a cryptic look and suddenly throws back the blanket and stands. Instinctively, I step forward, blocking her path.

"Where do you think you're going?"

I don't mean to growl, but the protective dip in my voice almost sounds like a snarl, making her narrow her eyes at me.

"If you really need to know, nosy, I'm going to go pee. And then I'm going to look and see what I can make to eat." Her expression turns

speculative. “Unless you know how to cook?”

I clear my throat, suddenly uncomfortable as heat rises in my neck, ears, and lastly my cheeks. “Ah. Cooking...” I leave the sentence unfinished, unsure of how exactly to admit my utter lack of skill or any capability.

“Let me guess, not in your repertoire.” The look she gives me is one of amused exasperation as she shakes her head and ducks by me. “Of course not. Why should I have expected someone who volunteered to be my shadow and take care of me to know how to prepare food?” she teases mercilessly as she walks to the back of the cottage where the toilet closet is hidden away.

I frown after her and then turn to scowl at the cooking area. She is not wrong. I didn’t think this part through. Maybe I can find something suitable in the cellar’s icebox that won’t be too difficult to work with. The cottages are kept stocked with thick blocks of ice that are refreshed every week to keep our butchered meats cold. I am certain that I can at least find that much. Maybe I can char a bit of meat for her like I would normally do for myself at my own cottage. Not exactly a balanced diet, but that’s why I take my midday meal in the village, regardless of whether I am on duty or not.

I turn toward the entrance, determined to provide for my female one way or another when I’m startled by someone banging on the door.

“Is that you banging around out there, Bodi?” Lynn calls out, her voice muffled.

“It’s the door!” I shout back. “I will see to it.”

Her muffled agreement is adorable. It’s like she believes she has a choice in this. I certainly wouldn’t have been able to allow her to place herself bodily between me and whoever is on the other side of the door. Every instinct within me would have forbidden it in a desperate need to protect my mate.

That she’s unaware of the fact that she’s my mate and our relationship technically isn’t yet developed is inconsequential when it comes right down to what my instincts demand. That we are not yet mates in truth is merely a minor detail only that just needs a bit of time to work itself out.

The banging comes again, more insistent, and a low growl rumbles in my chest. “I am coming! Hold onto your damned impatience!”

“Well, hurry up,” comes a familiar, impatient voice from the other side.

Groaning, I open the door to find my twin glaring at me from the other side, her arms laden with two large, steaming containers. The sight of them goes a long way to soothe my irritation at being interrupted. Erra huffs and shakes her head, her numerous braids swinging around her shoulders with that disgruntled gesture.

“Invite me in or move out of the way,” she snaps.

Grunting, I stand aside so that Erra can shuffle in, the pair of heavy earthenware containers teetering dangerously in her grasp as she makes her way to the long table in the kitchen. Scratching my jaw, I follow her. As she manages to set them down, I go about curiously inspecting them one by one, each one filled with a different cooked dish.

“You couldn’t have made all of this.”

“Of course I didn’t,” she scoffs. “Our birthday is not the only trait we share. Mother sent me here with it. She heard what happened to the human... and your insistence to take care of her.” She brushes a speck of dirt from her tunic, her lips curling with amusement. “Since she knows that you can’t cook any better than I can, she spent the morning making all of this and then tracked me down at The Ax and Mace to make sure I brought it over to you.”

“Huh,” I mumble, setting aside the dish of lightly spiced sausages and potatoes that I think Lynn will enjoy. Her stomach is still sensitive, but the spices in this are mild enough not to upset it while still being appropriately filling. The other I will put into the icebox until the evening.

Erra’s eyes narrow on me, her lips pursing. “You do realize that she’s going to want to meet her.”

I hide a grimace and nod. “Eventually.”

After I make sure that Lynn is attached to me enough that my mother’s strong personality and passion for interfering in her children’s lives doesn’t scare her away, that is.

Erra exhales in disgust. “Good luck if you hope to avoid her,” she mutters. “Sure as all hells didn’t work for me.”

“I am not avoiding, just delaying,” I clarify, ignoring her snort of disbelief.

I love my mother, but I’m a grown male—a warrior—and she terrifies even me. There is only so much I’m willing to subject my female to

during the period in which our new relationship... such as it is... is fragile.

A soft patter of feet draws my attention to Lynn as she enters the room, her eyes widening slightly when Erra turns toward her and crosses her arms in a manner that could be interpreted as hostile rather than curious by anyone who didn't know my sister.

Lynn's eyebrows shoot up. "We have a guest, I see."

Bold and fearless is my Lynn.

I beam at her and tip my head toward my twin. "This is my twin Ehndera, or Erra as she prefers to be called." I ignore the dirty look that she gives me for daring to use her proper name and open the container of sausage, melty cheese, and potato. "She brought sustenance."

"Oh, thank goodness," Lynn sighs before dragging in a deep breath of the fragrant air. Her lips quirk. "I was almost afraid to discover what you would've conjured. This smells wonderful."

The smile she gives my sister is genuine and not the least bit intimidated, despite the fact that Erra is practically a stranger.

"Thank you."

Erra cocks her head, her expression betraying her surprise until slowly she nods in response. "You're not what I expected. I've been under the impression that most of the humans who come as visitors expect to be served as if we are paid attendants. You remind me more of the chieftain's mate."

Lynn looks a little taken aback, but before I can apologize for my sister's bluntness, she suddenly laughs. "Yes, I suppose that's a good description of some of the unpleasant parts of tourism. In any case, truly I appreciate this."

The corner of Erra's lips twitches. "So I see. Well, you are welcome, but I can't claim the credit. Our mother sent this in hopes it would help you feel better."

A look of consternation flickers on Lynn's face, and she gives a self-deprecating chuckle. "Oh. I guess word of my illness spread fast."

Erra lifts one shoulder in a casual shrug. "Only to those to whom it may matter." She pauses, her lips curving slowly into a real smile. "And our mother is very convincing when she wants to know something."

The last is offered with a meaningful look to me, and my mouth pulls in a grimace once more. I can only imagine. As the oldest of Elga Ironclaw's children, my mother has made a point of knowing every little

thing I take interest in or get involved with. Every failed courtship in my youth was accompanied by unwanted observations and advice. Naturally, she would have heard that I was exhibiting guarding behavior around Lynn. That alone would have told her all that she needed to know about the situation. My mother's interference is expected, but this is one time that I can't really complain.

I just dread whatever may come next, because I know my mother well enough to know that it will not stop here.

My sister's grin turns sharp as she watches me squirm. Slowly, she pushes away from the table and stretches her arms.

"Well, my good deed for the day has been done. I better get back to the tavern before Gavith begins wondering if someone has stolen me away."

I snort. "He would only be so lucky, though I would pity any other male who took you."

A sharp grunt bursts out of me as Erra, heavy-handed as ever, chuckles as she walks by me, giving my back a hard slap in passing.

"Enjoy the rest of your day!" she bellows.

Lynn's eyes follow her departure, a smile playing at her lips. It is only when Erra is gone that her gaze slides back to me and she grins.

"I like her."

"Good, then you can come live with me so you can intercept her while I hide," I say, only half-teasing.

She snickers and shakes her head. "Nice try, orc."

My grin is unrepentant as I fetch a pair of bowls from the cupboard and utensils. "Well then, how about some food, human?"

I get a gracious nod as she drops into a chair at the table while I divide the contents of the container between the two bowls, setting one in front of her. We eat in relative silence with just snips of conversation flowing between us as she asks random questions about growing up in the village. When we finish, I pluck up the bowls before she has the opportunity to rise and send her back out to her chair while I set about cleaning everything up and taking the other container out to the icebox.

Everything once again set right, I wander back to our cozy place by the hearth to see that Lynn is wrapped thoroughly in the large quilt, a book propped up in her hands.

"What are you reading?" I ask softly, nodding to her book when her eyes lift to meet mine.

Her cheeks pinken and she looks away. "A book."

"That I can see," I tease. "Believe it or not, I have read my fair share of books. Orcs are quite fond of tales."

She glances at me out of the corner of her eye, a blonde eyebrow arching. "And you enjoy reading?"

I nod. "It is nice to enjoy someone else's life for a time, even a fictional one."

Lowering the book, she looks over at me with interest. My heart stutters. Oh, how much I have wanted her to look at me like that!

"I can't agree more. What do you enjoy reading?"

I shrug. "Most of our tales have grand adventures, daring battles, sworn oaths between mates found and that sort of thing." I nod to the book again. "What is that story of?"

"Sort of an adventure and romance," she says slowly, her cheeks deepening in color in a way that I find delightful.

I grin and settle back into my chair. "Sounds entertaining. You should read me some if you feel up to it."

Her eyebrows shoot straight up to her hairline and fingers twitch on her book uncertainly. "You would... like that? Are you sure?"

"I have no doubt. From the beginning, if you don't mind," I instruct with a casual roll of my hand.

A soft laugh rises from her as she opens the book at the beginning. "All right then."

The sound of her voice carries us as the hours pass. I stop her several times to get her something to drink or to check on Haith and take care of his needs. She even continues to read to me at the table while we enjoy our evening meal. She reads until she tires and, with blurry eyes, sets the book down on the table beside her chair. She looks so wonderfully relaxed and happy that I can't let our evening end there, so in a low voice I begin telling old tales I have heard since I was an orcling from my father and his father before him, spinning our world's history for her, the brave deeds of orcs who've gone before, until at last her eyes flicker closed as sleep claims her.

The hour is late when Kassie returns. I wave off her whispered apologies, delighted with how the evening went as I rise to my feet. I can imagine many more such sedate evenings with my Lynn. Tonight has given me something to dream about. The only thing that would have made it

better would have been the weight of my mate's body in my arms and the taste of her on my tongue.

But I will be patient. I have all the time in the world.

CHAPTER 15



LYNN

The last day of our vacation dawns with a blustery chill. With all the good weather we've enjoyed during our time in the orc village, it was perhaps too much to expect it to continue. I don't bother setting up the café today. Despite being closed for a day while I was sick, business yesterday was incredible, and we rewarded ourselves with another trip to the fair. This time, while avoiding the pies and sticking to sugary treats doled out by goblins and trolls, we played games and purchased gifts to take home. I managed to settle on a tiny handmade troll doll as a gift for Kassie's mother for watching Casper while she hunts down gifts to take home to her kids.

By the time we return to our cottage, we're exhausted, Kassie's ankles have swollen and we are loaded with all of her souvenirs, even a fancy blade she purchased for Jason. I happen to think it's the perfect gift for him mostly with the hope that the asshole will cut himself with it, but I keep those thoughts to myself.

Today, however, is just for fun. After venturing out this morning to meet with Orgath while Kassie slept in, I've secured permission to return and set up a business, so I know that work can wait until I return. As it is, I know it will take time to properly build my café, which will give me plenty of time to get my things in order and get comfortable here before I have to even think about actual work.

So, we're spending our time touring the ground and interior of the keep. Kassie hangs by my side eagerly as we follow the guide. She admitted last night to being too intimidated last time we visited to see anything. She was so distracted by nerves and making plans while I did business, she hadn't even gotten a look at the chieftain and his mate, which astounds me. Nor did she get an opportunity to meet the human queen later either, since we were busy enough to have somehow missed her customary visit.

Unfortunately, we aren't going to get the opportunity to meet her now either since Orgath and his mate are out of the keep taking care of clan business during the tour. It's disappointing but I get it. After all, I certainly

wouldn't want to have to try and work with a bunch of curious tourists under foot all day.

"Rotten luck," Kassie sighs yet again as she admires a particularly large tapestry.

I give her a bemused look. "I still can't believe that you seriously spaced out during our entire visit here."

"Hey, I was nervous," she replies indignantly. "And I had a lot on my mind. Besides, you know business conversations don't interest me and you were at it for hours, so I just entertained myself with looking at the marvelous tapestries," she says, gesturing at the tapestry in front of us.

"But I introduced you," I laugh in protest.

"I do seem to recall hearing that," she admits, her cheeks coloring with embarrassment. "It was just all too awkward. I mean, you are talking about royalty here. I didn't know how to respond, or where to look. Don't royal types get offended if you even so much as look at them wrong? I was being cautious." Her face brightens further. "And there was a really hot, big orc that I was trying not to look at."

"You could have said something earlier and I would have pointed them out at least in passing," I mutter. "As for the orc, you probably should have at least looked and enjoyed it before going back home."

She gapes at me, "Lynn, I'm married!"

"I didn't suggest sleeping with him," I retort. "Though ditching Jason for an orc wouldn't have been the worst idea."

Kassie snickers, her smile growing wicked. "That's just terrible."

"Maybe a tiny bit," I agree, holding my finger and thumb close together in emphasis of just how little.

She leans forward conspiratorially. "I know you don't believe it, but I'm telling you that I just have a feeling that things are going to turn around for us. Before I left, he seemed excited about some sort of surprise he was working on." She giggles. "I overheard him talking on the phone about it. I can't wait to see."

I squeeze her arm affectionately, pushing back my worry. "You'll have to tell me all about it."

She tilts her head. "You realize that we're going to have to buy magic mirrors when we get back home just so that we can make sure we keep in touch when you leave. I don't want a repeat of what happened between us in the past."

“Agreed. We will talk every week and update each other what’s going on.”

“And you can keep me informed about how things are going with Bodi,” she sings mischievously, earning her a scowl.

“It’s nothing like that,” I insist.

I spotted the idiot earlier, and he was once again wearing one of his stupid outfits that I wanted to burn on the spot. How can I possibly have feelings *again* for someone so designed to stick out—and *who enjoys it*?

“Sure it’s not,” she agrees too easily. “And that’s why you nearly had a heart attack upon seeing him. Hmm. He certainly is colorful.”

“That would be a word for it,” I mutter.

“And not unattractive.”

“And doesn’t he know it all too well.”

Kassie’s laughter fills the hall as she looks at me askance. “Weren’t you the one who dated the most questionable guys in college, saying that you can’t judge a book by its cover? Correct me if I’m wrong.”

I roll my eyes. “No, you’re right. The thing is, Bodi doesn’t have a cover... he has an entire centerfold layout with a complementary billboard.”

“And you like him,” she whispers deviously. “Or it wouldn’t bother you so much.”

“Hmph. Maybe,” I concede reluctantly, then shoot her warning look. “Not that it means anything.”

She shrugs. “It will still be interesting to see if anything comes of it. So you’ll know I’ll be pestering you.”

“Fine, whatever,” I mutter, waving my hand to shush her.

I swear that I keep hearing footsteps following behind us as we’ve followed our guided tour through the halls of the keep. Even walking in the middle of the group doesn’t help because I can still catch faint echoes, but every time I pause to listen, it disappears. It’s starting to make me paranoid. Why the hell would anyone be following behind us making an obvious effort to conceal their presence? Unless I’m just imagining things. It is an old building, after all.

I’m relieved when our tour group rounds a corner and the strange silence and creeping steps halts. A moment later, there’s the sound of distinct retreat as if someone is walking away, but I can’t say if it’s the same footsteps I’ve been hearing or merely someone stepping into the hall

and heading in the opposite direction. My relief gives way to annoyance as I see the object of my frustration just ahead, speaking to one of the guards under his command.

The brilliant blue tunic he's wearing today complements his coloring beautifully, but the skin-tight white trousers are even worse than any of the ones he wore before, outlining everything boldly, even if a third of his package is covered by the hem of his very short tunic. He does look incredible, though, so I can well understand the few happy sighs I hear. My own heart races when he looks my way and greets me with a devastatingly beautiful smile, the gold bands around his tusks glinting.

Murmuring something to the guard, he heads directly toward us, his eyes glittering with a heat that sears into the deepest and most hidden parts of me. His eyes slide over the rest of our group casually as he greets everyone collectively before pinning me once more with his burning green gaze.

"How are you doing today?" he murmurs, his mouth pursing at the low-cut collar of my tunic, showing just a hint of my cleavage. Green eyes darkening, he sweeps a sharp look over our group and his guards, a low rumble rattling in his chest that stirs undeniable excitement in my blood. He leans forward, his breath fanning my cheek. "I think you are missing part of your tunic, lanara," he whispers.

"Really?" My eyebrows rise because this tunic is perfectly respectable, especially compared to some clothes out there for women. "That's funny because I was going to say the same thing about your tunic, and perhaps recommend you get another tailor who isn't going to deprive you of a normal amount of fabric for your trousers."

He glances down at himself, and his frown deepens. "What is wrong with them?"

"Not a damn thing if you're trying to sell something," I reply.

His eyes smolder. "Are you perhaps telling me that you are interested? I will not sell, but I would be happy to give it all to you. Every inch."

"Damn," a voice whispers off to my side. "I'll do him if she doesn't."

"Shhh!" another hisses.

My face heats, and I step back away from him. I can't believe I'm standing here making a spectacle of myself for the amusement of other tourists.

Surprisingly, his expression sobers in the face of my embarrassment, and he straightens to place himself protectively in front of me.

“There is nothing to be ashamed of, lanara,” he says quietly. “My desire and my body are yours. I like it when you look at me and desire me. I like knowing that anyone else’s desires are inconsequential because this is all to entice you alone.”

I take a shuddering breath, my skin prickling with desire as something warms deep in my chest and spreads throughout me from that apex.

“I have a hard time believing that when you were dressing like that when we met. Everything about you is designed to be deliberately ostentatious.”

“Only in the hopes that it might eventually draw my mate to me,” he murmurs.

“And gold tusk rings are supposed to do it too?” I ask wryly. “That’s kind of outside of human fashion norms.” Not entirely accurate, since there are those who do gold teeth, but the ornate gold bands aren’t really quite like that.

He gives me a startled look and then chuckles in a way that rasps along my skin and at the same time manages to infuriate me.

“They are not merely decoration. They signify my rank and accolades as a warrior, my Lynn,” he rumbles, his eyes softening. “The first band is for being an elite warrior, and the second band for being elevated to captain of the guard.”

And now I feel like an idiot.

“Oh. Well, crap,” I mutter.

From the front of the group, the guide clears his throat loudly, a disgruntled expression creasing his weathered face. An elderly orc with hair swan-wing white, he has both incredible knowledge and an impressively short fuse. Already multiple times during this tour I’ve seen him growl and snap orders to those stationed around the keep. And now it seems that we are his new favorite target, his blind eye seeming to glare as balefully at us as the functional one.

“Bodi, are you planning on joining our tour or are you just here to poach from my group?” the orc snarls. “Not everything waits on your pleasure, or that of your female,” he adds, giving me an equally hard look. “If you two do not mind, we are ready to move on.”

“Looks like we’re in trouble,” I whisper.

Straightening back to his full height, Bodi smirks and winks at me. The look he gives the guide, though, is one of surprisingly patient amusement despite the male's sharp words.

"I would be delighted to accompany you as I finish making rounds," he agrees.

The elderly orc squints at him suspiciously but then nods.

"Good. Keep up then and quit distracting the female. Maybe you will even be fortunate enough to learn something."

I stifle a laugh as Bodi raises his eyes in resignation. He doesn't miss my quiet snicker, however, and flashes me a grin as he clasps his hands behind his back and hovers close by my side as we continue through the gallery. Every now and then, I feel his hot gaze on me, and when we're ready to depart at the end of the tour, Bodi grabs my hand to keep me for a moment longer at his side.

My tongue glues to the top of my mouth at the heat rolling through his eyes, and even Kassie excuses herself to catch up with the group as people begin to scatter through the garden that concludes the tour of the keep.

Only the briefest glance around confirms that we are completely alone, and my lungs squeeze tightly in my chest as he runs his thumb back and forth over my hand.

"You leave tomorrow?" he whispers.

I nod. "Just for about a week or so to get everything in order and pack my belongings, then I'll be back."

"With your Casper," he adds, his lips lifting into a fond smile.

"Yes, with him," I agree with a shaky laugh, suddenly nervous some for inexplicable reason.

He nods, bringing my hand to his lips, the warm brush of them against my skin sending tingles down my arm as his green eyes bore into me with such intensity that for a moment I'm caught in him, my belly heating with a sudden rush of desire. His nostrils flare, scenting the air, and his lips bow as he very gently releases my hand.

"Then I shall very eagerly await your return so that we can pick up again where we've left off."

With one last heated look, he turns away to stroll back into the keep, leaving me staring after him. I swallow thickly and hurry to rejoin Kassie, my heart thudding with echoes of passion he rose within me with one growled promise.

CHAPTER 16



LYNN

Two weeks of getting shit in order and packing. Not one but two. I'm almost at the end of my rope, not only from the stress but also because of a wicked sexual tension that haunts me every night with the most erotic dreams.

Despite this insanity, I'm actually relieved in some ways. The café sold faster than I would have ever guessed. I suspect it was mostly for development rather than any true interest in the café itself—which made me a little sad to know that my mother's business would no longer be there when I'm gone—but I'm happy I won't have to leave the matter in someone else's hands and hold negotiations by mirror.

What is occupying my mind, however, is the fact that I have an upcoming appointment to keep. A date that has been in my thoughts a lot, as has been a certain orc. He's the one who visits me every night. It's his touch I dream of, his kiss that leaves me sweaty with unfilled need when I wake. A need that coils tighter within me throughout the day until it borders on madness.

Kassie groans, her hands gripping her hips as she stretches her back. "I do think that is everything," she proclaims, looking over the reusable wooden crates that we've painstakingly nailed shut.

I'm not taking any plastic over there outside of a few personal belongings, so these work fine for me. When they've outlived their usefulness in this form, they will easily turn into kindling for my hearth.

"I can't believe we've finally finished." I sigh and look over at her. "Are you sure you don't want to come with me?"

Her bottom lip wobbles, and she scrubs her eyes with the back of her sweater's sleeve, wiping away her tears. She breathes in deep and shakes her head.

"No. I can't do that to my kids. Not right now," she mumbles.

My heart goes out to her, along with a terrible need to punch that asshole, Jason. Her now ex-husband as of two-weeks. The bastard had divorce papers waiting at home for her the day we returned from Ov'Gorg.

Apparently, the *surprise* he was so excited about was his new pregnant fiancée's engagement ring.

He'd traded up for the newer model of wife, just like Andrew, leaving my best friend heartbroken. This entire situation makes me wish I had attempted to talk Bodi into accompanying me back. For a single moment while he held me against him, I had been tempted. Right now, his brawn for carrying crates would have been helpful. As would have his ax for dealing with a certain philanderer.

Oh, I wouldn't have asked him to kill Jason. Just neuter him.

I sigh and rock back onto my heels as I regard her. "You will let me know if you change your mind... right? You will always have a job waiting for you at my café."

She gives me a sad smile. "And what would I do there? I don't want to be your charity case, Lynn."

"Charity? Please." I roll my eyes. "You think I want to cover all the cooking and baking that has to be done? I'm trying to bribe you, woman."

Her laughter is painfully quiet. "I will keep that in mind."

There is a knock at the door, and despite the fact that I've been expecting it, I jerk a little in surprise. Before I can go to the door to open it, Kassie throws her arms around me, hugging me tight. I return the embrace, my eyes wetting. Something about this feels a lot like saying goodbye and letting go despite our intention to keep in touch by mirror. I promise myself to call her every weekend whether she likes it or not.

Leaning over, she picks up my duffel bag just behind her and hands it to me. It has a bit of extra weight to it thanks to the magic mirror in there that will help me communicate cross-portal with her. This is followed by the canvas pet carrier that I take in my other hand. From within, I hear Casper's plaintive mewl and the light scratch of his claws. I know he'll be like this until he's settled into our home. Soon his sedatives will kick in for transport, however, and he will sleep for most of it.

Ignoring his fussing, I reach out and take Kassie's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. I bend my head slightly so I'm able to make her meet my eyes and give her a small smile.

"I will call you on Sunday. Every Sunday," I clarify with another squeeze. "One week at a time, and things will get better. I'll be there for you. I promise."

She exhales slowly and nods her head. “Yeah. Okay. Every Sunday,” she agrees, a tiny smile pulling at her lips. “Thank you. It will probably be the only thing really keeping me sane.”

“Then it will benefit us both because I know I’m going to need them,” I tease. “Who am I going to bitch to when something goes wrong or Bodi acts stupid?”

Her laughter this time is louder and more genuine. “I don’t know, maybe Bodi himself?”

I give an exaggerated roll of my eyes. “Like that’ll help. He’ll be at the root of at least half of my problems.”

Kassie finally giggles. “I almost wish I was going to be there just to watch you two circle each other. Him always pursuing, and there’s you, uncertain if you want to be caught or not.”

I find myself smiling at that observation because it’s entirely wrong. Bodi and I do seem to have this push and pull thing that’s been going on between us since we met. And it all seems to be winding down, creating something entirely new between us.

“If I’m caught, you’ll be the first one to know,” I promise.

A fist thumps on my door, and I expel a sharp sigh. “That’ll be the trans-portal porters. I guess that means it’s time to go.” I give her a pinched look. “I’m going to worry about you. Please make sure you won’t be overdoing anything.”

She gives me an amused look and shakes her head as she follows me. “Nah, I’m on maternity leave until I pop due to all the recent stress.” She grimaces. “Unpaid mostly, of course, but at least I’ll have a bit of alimony from Jason for the next few months.

I bite back an unnecessary retort about my opinion about that pitiful alimony because that’s the last thing she needs, and I open the door to let in the porters. Two trolls and a particularly large human enter, the massive bodies filling up the room as they look over at me expectantly until I point out my crates to them.

Without a word, they nod and get to work, carrying the large crates out to the cart waiting outside of my apartment. The two mules that are hitched jerk their heads against their reins, impatient to go. I worried that this would take inordinately long, but to my surprise this highly recommended crew works efficiently in complete silence until nothing remains in the apartment except for us. I sign off on the paperwork that the

larger of the two trolls hands me before handing it back to him. Looking over my signature, he nods and lifts his eyes to meet my gaze.

“We are all set, Lynn Taylor. We need to depart soon.”

“I’ll be right down,” I assure him with a smile.

He nods and heads out, leaving Kassie and me alone in the bare room. Fishing the key out of my apartment, I set it on the counter for the landlord and lightly pat the surface as I give the place one final look around.

I’m not going to miss it all that much. Returning here after spending a week in the comfort of a cottage made me feel entirely out of place. I wonder if Kassie feels that too, but I don’t think she would appreciate me prying further. With another sigh, I turn away, walking toward the door. I am surprised when I’m pulled up short and Kassie’s arms go around me for one last squeeze.

“Thank you for just being here,” she whispers. She pulls back, tears standing in her eyes despite her smile. “I’m really so happy for you. You’re getting out there and doing something that you want. And I promise I will make sure to be at the mirror every Sunday. In fact, mirror me when you get settled in. I don’t care what time it is.”

“I will,” I assure her with an answering smile.

We walk out of the apartment, shutting the door behind us and descending the stairs out to the street. The nip of cold hits me immediately, and I tug my pink coat up higher around me and adjust my scarf. I can see the porters watching me patiently, but I raise an eyebrow at my friend.

“You’ll think about my offer?”

She nods, one corner of her mouth inching up a little more. “Yeah, I’ll think about it.”

I squeeze her shoulder. “Good. Take care of yourself and those babies.”

“You take care, too,” she whispers as I walk away.

My heart is in my throat when I climb into the cart and allow myself to be fastened in. I can’t resist looking back to wave to my friend as we pull away. She doesn’t move from that spot in front of my building, waving farewell as she gradually becomes smaller and smaller in the distance. When we round a corner and she disappears completely from sight, I settle back into my seat and rub my arms briskly.

The troll sitting across from me gives me a sympathetic smile. "It's cold today. Ov'Gorg won't be this bitter yet, not around Obrul-tarin. It won't be long."

"Good," I mumble. "I think I'm ready for it."

More than anything, I'm definitely ready to see a certain orc that I hope is waiting for me as he claimed. The need for him has been itching beneath my skin, growing more frantic as the days bled into one another. I need him desperately and hope that he hasn't already forgotten me.

CHAPTER 17



BODI

Every day for a week, I've stared out of the keep at various points during my rounds, waiting expectantly for my mate's return. I am growing nervous, reminding myself that she will return, but as the days have slipped by and one week turned to two—and the Lantern Labyrinth looms ever closer—I feel a certain hopelessness filling me. It has made my temper short, especially with the guards at the portal when each day passes without word from them of her arrival.

"Do not be so impatient, Bodi. She will arrive," Orgath rumbles with a touch of exasperation as I once again return to the window at the portal.

"Something might have delayed her. She could be hurt, or she might have even changed her mind," I protest, my mind churning frantically. "I knew I should have insisted on accompanying her. If I leave immediately, I can..."

"Relax, cousin," he sighs. "Give her a little more time. You will recall that when we brought Sammi here it was no quick or easy thing and there were many of us working together." He nods thoughtfully. "She won't remain apart from you long. By now, the bond will be having a similar effect on her, making her need reunion as much as you."

"The bloodbond," I breathe, hope stirring in my chest. I had been refusing to put a name to my intense need for Lynn, not wanting to be disappointed if I were wrong. Telling myself that what I feel for her would be enough regardless, because she is mine. *My mate*. But I cannot deny that I want that, crave the bloodbond, as much as I have since Orgath found Sammi. "Are you certain?"

He tilts his head curiously, his yellow gaze fixed intently on me. "Are you not?"

I notice the direction of his gaze and look down at my hands. They are clenched so tight that the knuckles are white, the claws digging into the meat of my palms. Slowly, I unclench them and shake them loose at my sides. The need to bind my mate to me is growing exponentially. It is all very clear now.

"Yes," I growl, flexing my claws.

He nods. "Then we wait. Until then there are other problems that require our attention."

I glance over at him curiously and force myself from the window to join him. "Problems? Such as what?"

Orgath folds his hands over his stomach, his brows drawn low in contemplation. "I have been hearing some disturbing rumors of a faction rising up in parts of Ov'Gorg called the Bright Blood. Obsessive purists, the lot of them." He curls his lip in disgust. "There has been speculation on this movement among the elves, but they are a peculiar species anyway and I wasn't concerned so long as it didn't bleed over to our own people."

"Does this mean that it now has?" I ask, my body stiffening warily.

He lifts a hand to apply circular pressure at his temple. "I've recently been made aware of rumors of Bright Bloods now spreading among our people here at Obrul-tarin and through some of the minor villages of our clan. They will not target Sammi. She is far too well protected. However, I worry that they may interfere with our clan's growth and prosperity that has come from aligning ourselves with humans."

"You worry of an attack," I growl, and he nods.

"It is only a matter of when. We need to make our territory safe."

"What do you suggest?"

Orgath's hard gaze settles on me. "Increase the patrols and select a small number of males from the guard who don't patrol the market. I want them trained to infiltrate the Bright Bloods over the next few days. You are to have them posted throughout to follow rumors and report back to you."

"Yes, Chieftain."

"There is another thing. There won't be any tourists coming again for some time yet, so we don't have to worry about stray humans getting hurt, aside from one. I am fully expecting you to do everything in your power to guard your mate. It will take time for her café to be built, but I don't want her selling her coffees alone on the street, nor do I want her vulnerable in the human housing area that she used when she was visiting. She will be too isolated and alone there." He leans forward, his jaw clenching. "You will take her into your own cottage. Don't pressure her into mating—although gods be praised if things move that way naturally in the process—but provide for her a place to sleep and dwell where you will best be able to protect her."

"And what of my duties here?"

“You will still report here for the first half of the day. Your cottage is well fortified. If she stays indoors while you are gone, there will be little risk.”

I nod because that is true. Not even Garval with his superior size and strength is able to force entry into my cottage.

“And if she refuses?” I ask carefully.

Orgath frowns. “She will not have that option. This is part of the safety requirements. I had forewarned her that there would be an adjustment period in which she would have to do things our way. This is part of it as far as I am concerned.”

I incline my head in acceptance. I suspect that my Lynn will not be pleased by this arrangement, and yet I can’t help but feel strangely excited by it. Regardless of whether I can consummate our bond or not, I will have my mate exactly where she belongs. It satisfies the primal part of me that wants to growl and jealously protect her from any threat.

“Captain?” a voice intrudes.

My gaze snaps over to a young guard. “What is it?”

He hesitates for a moment, his gaze going back and forth between us as he summons his nerve to speak. I am impatient enough that I want to lash out at him, but I manage to restrain myself if just barely.

“You said to alert you if there was any portal activity from Ov’Ge...”

My heart slams against my ribs, my gaze narrowing on him as my entire focus draws in on him alone.

“And?” I demand, eager for word of my mate.

His mouth gapes open, but no sound comes out. My claws flex in irritation as I wait. I can see that it is making him even more nervous, but when he fails to say anything more, I growl loud enough to startle some sense into him.

“Whatever you have to say, hurry up and deliver it!”

He jerks at my sharp voice but nods in compliance. “Of course, Captain. My apologies. Someone has come through.” He hesitates. “A few someones, actually. Two humans and a pair of trolls.”

I try not to let my disappointment show. It must be another delivery for Sammi if trolls are transporting. I wave a hand. “Have them put everything in the larder. The staff will know how to sort it.”

He balks, fidgeting in place, and I narrow my eyes at him.

“Is there anything else?” I demand as I lift up our delivery schedule to scrutinize it. The shipment seems to have come a bit early this time.

“Begging your pardon, Captain, but it doesn’t look like supplies,” he mumbles nervously. “The cart is full of wooden crates and the female seems insistent to continue on her way.”

My nostrils flare, my eyes snapping up at him once more as I lower the schedule. From the corner of my eye, I can see Orgath’s lips twitch with barely suppressed amusement. “A female?”

The guard nods again. “Yes. She said something about wanting to get her coffee stored quickly before the rain starts up and told me to fetch you by name.”

My heart leaps in my chest and I stride forward, my hand clasping the guard’s arm like a steel band. “Short blonde hair and blue eyes?” I demand, almost unable to believe it.

At the guard’s quick nod, I release him with a laugh and turn to Orgath.

“Permission to attend to my female, Chieftain?”

My cousin’s smile is indulgent as he reclines in his throne. “Get out of my keep, Captain,” he mutters good-naturedly. “And remember what I said.”

I tip my head in acknowledgment before turning once more to the waiting guard. With an impatient flick of my wrist, I wave him ahead of me.

“Come on then. Let’s see to her. Hurry, pick up your feet!” I bark when the male shuffles anxiously ahead.

He springs forward as if I’ve lit a fire under his ass, and I grunt, appeased by his sudden discovery of speed. Nothing will delay me from getting to my mate. It is some distance to my cottage yet, and I certainly don’t want her to get caught out in the rain that has been threatening all day. Nor her personal belongings for that matter, a good portion of which seems to be a coveted supply of coffee.

Striding at a quick, easy lope, I follow the guard through the keep and winding roads of the village until the landscape opens up to reveal the shimmering doorway of the portal. A cart sits off to the side with a pair of guards inspecting it thoroughly. A pair of trolls and a surprisingly large human male stand off to one side while the slim, familiar figure of a female berates the guards as she follows them around the cart.

Life returns to my heart and soul at that moment. I don't even bother to wait for the guard as I hurry forward. It takes me but a moment to get to her side and a fraction less for her to turn enough to see me coming. Her eyes widen and spark with something that looks so much like pleasure that I want to both bellow with triumph and weep for the sheer joy of it.

Without breaking pace, I scoop her up into my arms, lifting her high as I whirl her around before clasping her close to my chest. Her breath tickles the small expanse of my chest bared at the top of my tunic as she softly laughs, and I can feel the rapid thud of her heart pressed up against me. Her softness is a blessed comfort to my hard warrior's body. And everything is tense and hard with need, especially my cock that digs into her soft belly.

She smooths a hand over my arm. "I guess this means you missed me and are happy to see me?" she says softly, a teasing lilt in her voice.

"This means I'm more relieved than I have ever been in my life, seeing you here and having you in my arms," I groan.

Her breath audibly catches on a sigh, and with great difficulty I slowly peel myself away from her so that I can look down at my sweet Lynn.

Her eyes are bright and glazed with surprise, even as happiness dances in their depths and her breathing rasps with an eagerness that pulses through my veins. I take her hand in mine, delighting in the soft warmth of it as I stroke my fingers over her delicate skin.

"Come," I rasp.

She gives me a curious look. "Where are we going?"

"To borrow a cart and get Haith hitched so that I can take you home," I growl, far sharper than I intended.

If I thought my ferocity would frighten her, then I underestimated my mate. Her smile widens, and she doesn't even protest when I carry her back to the keep. I can't set her down. Not yet. I'm not certain when I will be able to. As I pass through the halls, I catch Garval's eye, but he smiles. He is happy for me, despite the fact that he will not have this.

I raise my own hand in return before hauling my mate away, my only thoughts on escaping the place to find a moment or two alone at last.

CHAPTER 18



LYNN

*B*odi's ferocity and the tense muscles rippling beneath me as he carries me through the keep are so arousing. I never once believed I would be turned on by a brute of a male. He's not only proved me wrong but also seems to be tied to me, heart and soul. I can feel the faint links that have somehow forged between us. I don't know when it happened, but two weeks without him made me shockingly aware of it, and now that I'm with him again and am able to touch and smell him... I just want to wrap myself up in his presence and never leave.

A quiver of need shoots through my belly, and I groan in protest when he suddenly sets me on my feet. There is the scent of warm straw, and the air has a cool bite to it as if we're once again outside. A delfass moans, scenting our presence. Haith? We must be in the stable area behind the keep.

"Just for a moment," Bodi whispers, and I'm not certain if he's reassuring himself or me.

Stalking over to a nearby stall, Bodi murmurs something and a large black feline head pops over the side, Haith's dark, velvety ears pricking. The delfass remains still, however, as Bodi opens the gate to the stall, murmuring something softly. The words are too quiet for me to pick up on, but Haith's thick, fluffy tail swishes and he sedately allows Bodi to lead him out into the stable. He lightly bumps his head against Bodi's back before taking the orc's shoulder into his mouth. Chuckling, Bodi pushes the big head away as they turn toward a far corner of the stable where a carriage and several carts of different sizes are secured out of the elements.

Haith is hitched to one of the smaller carts with impressive speed, the delfass standing as patiently as ever despite the subtle twitch of his tail. Clear, feline eyes blink at me while Bodi inspects and tightens all the straps, and a fierce purr rumbles in his chest as I draw closer. To my delight, it amps up the moment I begin to rub my hand along his brow and behind his ear. He dips his head lower to receive more scritches. I know

that I'm irrationally pleased by the small token of affection, but then I've always been a cat person.

From the soft carrier slung over my shoulder, I can hear a warning yowl emerge. Bodi glances up from where he tightens a strap on Haith's harness, and a dark eyebrow arches as he seeks the source of the sound. The corners of his eyes crinkle, and he chuckles.

"This must be Casper. You did not tell me that you would be bringing such a beast into my home," he teases.

"Please, he isn't all that bad," I object with a rueful look down at the bag when Casper's yowl raises in volume. I shoot Bodi a curious look. "And who said anything about going to your home anyway?"

He shrugs and gives me an easy, lopsided grin. "Chieftain's orders. You are new here and, given that there is a... connection between us, I have been placed in charge of seeing to your comfort and safety while your little cafe is built."

I stare at him, askance.

"I don't understand. Why can't I just use the same cottage I've been using until then?"

"Because there is no one else out there and a lone female far from the clan can draw unexpected danger. It is better for all of us. And I get the opportunity to be your gracious host," he adds with a smile. When I don't respond right away, he cocks his head and gives me a feigned injured look. "Unless you have some objections that you might wish to discuss with Orgath? Perhaps to seek out another protector who might provide accommodations."

As in, live with a stranger? Fuck no. If I'm going to be shackled up with anyone, it's going to be the orc I want. Two weeks of having this need crawling through me to be near him again, there is no question in my mind which orc that would be.

I give a quick but firm shake of my head.

His smile widens. "Good. I don't really enjoy telling you this, but you probably would have no choice in the matter if you had elected otherwise." He leans forward so that his lips brush my neck, along with the faint press of his tusks. He draws in a deep, lustful breath. "I would not have allowed any other to have you," he whispers.

I shiver at the intensity in his tone, desiring sparking deep within me. I'm barely able to breathe with the intimacy twining tighter between us

until he slowly lifts his head again. Nostrils flaring, no doubt scenting the perfume of my arousal as my core turns to liquid heat, his eyes gleam with satisfaction.

“Besides, there have been some rumors of anti-human activity and I would trust no other with your protection. You will definitely be safest out in my cottage than anywhere else. I want nothing more than to be the one to protect you and pass every spare moment that I can with you by my side. It is the culmination of all my dreams.”

My lips part with a small gasp. *Oh, wow.*

“Now, let us go home,” he rumbles, his voice rich with promise.

Suddenly I’m plucked from the ground once more, swinging through the air before being deposited onto the bench at the front of the cart. Within seconds, Bodi is hauling himself up beside me and picking up the reins.

It takes surprisingly little time for my belongings and supplies to be transferred from the porter’s cart once we arrive on that side of the keep. I suppose it has something to do with the fact that I brought only my most treasured and necessary belongings, and that four large males, three of them non-human, are able to work far more efficiently than I ever would have managed myself. Bodi growls a couple of times, jealously refusing to allow anyone else to handle the two crates that contain my most cherished possessions. The way his nostrils expand, and he breathes deep, as he carries them suggests that my scent is well soaked into my belongings within them.

His possessiveness over them is strange to me as a human, but, at the same time, is also bizarrely sweet knowing that his perceived claim on me seems to extend to anything of mine.

For their part, the porters appear all too happy to let him have it. The human among them, despite his burly size that almost puts him on par with the trolls, is noticeably at a disadvantage beside an orc. This isn’t lost on him either, and he’s the first back in the now empty cart, making himself comfortable on one of the smaller benches, eager to be gone from Obrul-tarin. The trolls tease him as they climb onto the steering bench. If their human co-worker says anything at all in reply, I don’t hear it because Bodi doesn’t waste any time. He’s back on the bench beside me and, with a sharp command, has Haith on the move once more.

We clear the grounds of the keep in mere minutes, and Bodi turns on an unfamiliar road that seems to circumvent the market. The bustling sounds of business can still be heard but the road that we take is peaceful and surprisingly charming, lined with numerous gated stone cottages. A few orcs are outside of their homes and watch us pass with inscrutable expressions. Although no one watches us with open hostility, it's still a bit disconcerting since orcs aren't terribly expressive.

Although some humans innately possess a resting bitch face, orcs, as a species, seem to have mastered it.

Bodi doesn't seem to pay attention to the eyes watching us, so I endeavor to do the same. Leaning against the raised back of the bench, I resolve to enjoy the drive. What I do note, however, is that the village is a lot larger than I realized. I probably would have known sooner if I had been able to go with Kassie to Stronghold Hill. No doubt there would have been a good view of the entire village from that vantage point.

From the limited viewpoint of the visitors' cottages that were placed conveniently near the square where the majority of the festival activities took place, there was little to give away the fact that Obrul-tarin easily rivals many of the average-sized towns back home. It was big enough that it took a surprising amount of time before we eventually emerge from it onto a cobbled road that stretches off into a landscape of small rocky hills and isolated areas dense with trees.

What I don't see is any sign of a cottage.

I glance over at the male beside me. "Uh, Bodi. I thought we were going to your cottage."

His eyebrows arch as he looks over at me, the corners of his mouth turning up. "Oh, we are. It is this way."

Aghast, I gesture at the craggy ground, rife with jutting stones and tall grasses yellowing from the cool autumn weather. "Where?"

His chuckle inspires a curl of warmth in my chest.

"I never claimed to live in the village. I live in my father's ancestral dwelling, just there by the family orchard and cider house." He points to a cluster of trees in the distance. "Although the cider house has rooms for those who come and help with the harvest, the apple harvest is over so there won't be anyone but you and I there." His expression turns lecherous. "And no neighbors to overhear."

I gape a little, a quiver of desire rushing through me like a bullet train.

“Okay,” I squeak, and then clear my throat, embarrassed at the sound that came out of me with that one word. I’m a mature woman, for fuck’s sake. “I guess you weren’t kidding at all about there not being any safer place for me. Although the whole ‘not having neighbors who might hear me scream’ thing can work against us too if someone with a hate-on for humans did manage to come across me out here.”

“Hate-on for humans...” he murmurs thoughtfully. Then he breaks out with a sudden smile and laughs again. “I do enjoy your human expressions, but yes, there are some potential pitfalls. It is unlikely that anyone will be looking out here for humans, so this will be the safest place in all of Obrul-tarin for you. And you will be with me, which is even safer,” he adds happily.

He sounds so damned pleased with that last part that my heart melts a little more and I make a point to relax. He’s right. Even if there are some villagers prejudiced against humans, it has nothing to do with me directly. It’s not like I’m a target. I haven’t even been here long. The reminder of the footsteps following us through the keep tour comes to mind, but I brush it off. The keep is big and old, and there are plenty of people, humans and orcs alike who were wandering through.

I’m hardly anyone special. If anyone with an anti-human agenda was there, it was likely someone following the group itself at large, or perhaps even searching for Sammi. Now *that* is a more likely target.

Although passing days in an orchard doesn’t necessarily excite me since it brings back a lot of dreary memories with Andrew, it’s safe, and I will get to enjoy having the orc I’ve been dreaming about for many days all to myself. It’s time to make new memories in another orchard.

“Time for a new adventure, Casper,” I whisper down to the carrier at my side as the cart turns down a smaller road that forks off of the main route, heading directly for the trees.

Bodi’s smile widens as he calls out a command. My hands fly to the side, gripping the edge tight when the cart suddenly picks up speed as Haith whisks us forward. By leaps and bounds the ground begins to level out a bit as we travel down a gradual incline, the mass of trees getting bigger and bigger until we’re close enough that I can see a sprawling stone house, one side almost swallowed by ivy, tucked in at its edge. A sense of excitement and eager anticipation fills me the closer we come to it. It just maybe feels like destiny.

Like home.

CHAPTER 19



LYNN

Bodi's eyes are on me when he sets me down in front of the cottage, the intricately carved door of warm polished oak rising up just in front of me. Unlike the smaller visitor cottage I stayed in that was clearly designed for someone human-sized, with a doorway Bodi had been forced to duck through every morning, I can see the difference compared to the massive proportions of his home. Things that I had barely noted in passing when we drove through the village were now more apparent as I face a true orc cottage up close and personal.

Grinning with excitement, Bodi leans forward just enough to reach around me and throw open the door. The door swings open, unhampered. There are no locks in place, but I would bet that not many would dare steal from an orc, and even fewer would risk stealing from the captain of the guard if the distance alone didn't discourage them. Moving me slightly out of the way, he steps inside and sniffs, his head tipping as it moves to the left and then the right. In the dark interior, his blue eyes faintly glow as they scan the space.

Finally, he grunts and pulls me in after him, making for the enormous chairs and a gigantic bench covered in cushions that vaguely resembles a couch. Without warning, he plucks me up to toss me gently onto the cushions. I might have protested the manhandling if it wasn't Bodi—and for the fact that my feet definitely don't touch the floor. Scrambling up into it would have been just as much of an indignity, if not more.

Crossing my legs at the ankles, I swing my feet aimlessly, because that's just what you're going to do when you are pint-sized on a couch, as I watch Bodi stride over to a hearth that has to be nearly as tall as I am. Leaning down, he piles in some wood, tucking tinder just beneath the grate holding the logs, and reaches for a metal box on the mantle. There's a spark, and in moments a bright flicker of flame begins to brighten the room as they grow. He shuffles the wood around a bit so that it catches better and then steps back, allowing the firelight to light up the room.

My mouth drops open as I get a much better look at my surroundings. It's... beautiful. There are thick furs thrown everywhere, the largest of

which looks like some gargantuan bear-type of animal stretched out in front of the hearth, and more than one brightly colored quilt is thrown over the arms and backs of the chairs to provide extra comfort. Small wooden end tables sit in between the couch and each of the sturdy chairs on either side of it, and like the cottage I stayed at before, there are a number of cushions stacked in a corner of the room for company.

While the whitewashed walls show some sign of dust, suggesting that the bachelor who lives here doesn't spend much time at home, the place is otherwise clean and extremely cozy. A colorful heavy glass oil lamp sits on the table closest to me, and I delight when Bodi comes over to light it as well. Next to it, there is a small, haphazard stack of books with orc script pressed into the covers. Even though I can't read them, I recognize the sign of a devoted bibliophile. Sure enough, one wall has two large bookcases that stretch across it filled with books. My eyes pass over the walls and note that, like the keep, there are some fine tapestries that look particularly old. The most intricate of them is the one that hangs over the hearth. The weaving is so well-done that it almost looks painted. From this tapestry, a formidable male surrounded by his family stares back at me. Every inch of him screams fantasy warrior, complete with a wicked scar running down the side of his face, although his clothes, despite possessing quality embroidery, appear somewhat ordinary and simple in style.

Noticing the direction of my attention, Bodi nods to the warrior. "My grandfather. Frightening, yes?" At my surprised laughter, he grins shamelessly. "Between the two of us, he scares me too, mostly because I remember how snarly he was from when I was an orcling. He spent quite a bit to commission this thing as a symbol of his success." He snorts. "It makes my skin crawl just a little how he stares down at me, but I am too afraid to take it down because I am certain he would find a way to step out from the world of the dead to beat me."

"I bet it's kept you well behaved, at least in this part of the cottage," I quip, and he bursts out into deep rolling laughter.

"You are not wrong," he agrees. "But we will save our most salacious activities for other parts of the house and property," he adds with a wink, his words sending my imagination into overdrive, curse him.

Hot, liquid desire churns within me, filling my veins, making my skin quiver and my pussy dampen with slick heat. I consider making some sort of flirty, half-cocky comment about his assumptions, but now that I've

faced my desires, I find that I just don't have any interest in playing such games. I'm old enough to know what I want and not be willing to waste time going after it.

Apparently, he's of the same mind because he leans down and captures my lips with his, drugging my senses with his kiss. His taste is bold, like a fine wine if it were mulled with the most exotic spices. The kiss ends all too soon, and he straightens and steps back. I can see how much it has affected him, though, because his large chest heaves with the panting breaths he drags in. I know how he feels, because my heart is hammering, and my breath rasps as if I just ran a marathon. He lifts a hand and gestures for me to stay like he thinks I might suddenly leap up and run out the door. My lips bow in a smile as he slowly backs away.

"I need to go put up Haith and bring in your belongings so that the weather doesn't ruin them. Just... stay here," he bids, giving me another brief peck as if he can't resist touching lips one more time, before shooting out the door.

Okay then, staying here. I lean back on the couch and make myself comfortable while I wait. I hear him speaking to Haith as he releases the delfass from the cart. His voice fades just a little as he walks away, presumably to put the animal to bed and fetch it meat from the cold storage in the cellar. It's only a short while later than he returns with the first armload of my things.

To my surprise, he doesn't return with one or two crates, but piles of four or five that he hauls in armloads and carefully deposits in a corner before going out for more. I stare after him in disbelief that soon turns to awe when he manages to bring in everything that I own in six trips. The moment he's unburdened, he closes the door and spins around to face me, his face taut with the very same desire that I feel.

Here we go...

Sliding off the couch, I drop to my feet and strip off my coat. The fire took the chill out of the air, but even if it hadn't, the arousal flooding my body is warming me deliciously. Bodi's gaze snaps to me, his eyes tracking me like that of a wolf or an enormous predatory cat. He could easily have been a delfass watching me, thrashing its tail. A low growl rumbles in his chest that makes my skin prickle with a rush of animalistic awareness.

“How do you feel about showing me the bedroom?” I ask, making my invitation clear.

His gaze sharpens on me, eyes flaring with a molten heat that I can feel sliding through me. A sharp pant escapes me, and his rumble gets louder, stirring my need. I don’t even have to move. Three strides and he has me, and once again I’m airborne before colliding into a warm, muscular chest.

“I would be delighted,” he purrs as he strides at a brisk pace from the room.

Even though the bedroom is noticeably darker than the main room, I can tell it’s nearly as large as the entire living room of my last apartment. It would have to be, though, to contain the enormous shadow of a bed dominating the room. I can’t make out many more details of my surroundings in the dark, but I do see the outline of another large hearth standing opposite the bed.

I have little doubt that the bedroom is as cozy and comfortable as the main room, but I can wait to see it later. Right now, all I need is the orc holding me close as he lowers me onto the bed. I barely even feel a trace of the chill still lingering on the air in here with the way our hot bodies press close to each other.

His hands are infinitely gentle, the light scrape of his short claws erotic as he peels me out of my clothes. Impatient, I go to help him, but he brushes my hands out of the way.

“I desire and enjoy this privilege of undressing you,” he murmurs, his voice thick with desire. “Allow me.”

I shiver and drop my arms at my side. It’s not from cold. The anticipation of each touch as he methodically works me out of my clothes makes my skin prickle further, and the need that has been roused begins to consume me with every careful touch. I’m close to begging by the time he finishes and reaches for his own clothes.

Pushing myself up to a seated position, I bat away his hands.

“My turn,” I whisper, loosening the ties at the front of his tunic.

His eyes widen, but he lowers his hands, giving me complete access.

Running my fingertips over the embroidery embellishing his tunic with a knotted geometric design, I admire the feel of it for a moment before allowing my hands to slide down and grip the hem. I pull it up slowly, exposing the defined muscles of his abs and waist, and then rising to pectorals that jump ever so slightly in reaction to my touch. He raises

his arms so I can pull it the rest of the way off, and I can't help but to admire the pronounced way his shoulders and biceps shift as he's freed of the material. Thick, dark hair falls back into place, the strands brushing my hand.

Fuck, he's beautiful. I almost love blue as much as pink, but right here and now I think his grayish cobalt blue is my new favorite color. He's too dark to be candy blue, but is a stormy color that makes me think summer rain and drops of water on my tongue. I wonder if he would taste sweet and fresh, or would his flavor be as rich and potent as his scent?

My fingers trail over his chest and down his abs only for the tips of my nails to catch on the band of his pants secured in place by lacings. My hands shake a little as I pluck at them, loosening them until I'm able to push them down over his hips. His thick erection catches on them only for a minute before popping free. Darker than the rest of him to the color of a thunderhead, it's incredibly thick and long. At its tip, a curved bit of metal gleams, and I stare in shock.

He's pierced. *Oh my.*

It's not that I'm prude or anything, but it's just not something I've ever come across. It appears almost sinfully provocative, and I yearn to explore it with my tongue. I wonder what exactly it would feel like. It's supposed to be incredible.

As my appreciative gaze climbs once more to the sculpted planes of his chest, strong hands grip my hips only to slide to my bottom. Large palms effortlessly cup my ass as he lifts me up against him and lays me on the bed, spreading me beneath him as his large body crawls gracefully over me, reinforcing the likeness to a predator in my mind.

Exhilaration thrums through me as I run my hands over miles of smooth muscle. I feel like I'm caught in one of my many dreams, but if that's the case, then I definitely don't want to wake up. I press a kiss to his chest, and he shudders, a raspy curse falling from him at the brush of my lips against his bare skin as my hands continue to explore him. Braced over me, he submits to my every explorative stroke.

When my hand finally slips around his cock, Bodi's body tenses and he growls, his eyes sliding shut. I give him one long, thorough stroke, testing the feel of him in my palm. His sex is as hefty as it looks, thick enough that I can't even completely enclose my fingers around it. It doesn't seem to limit his enjoyment, however. His body sways, thrusting against every

stroke, his brow knotting with strain as his skin ripples with a shiver. The feeling of control is euphoric. Just knowing that much has rendered this giant male as docile as a kitten intensifies my arousal.

I know that's only an illusion, and I see the truth of the matter when he suddenly bares his teeth in a savage smile, shattering my fantasy of control. My clit pulses with my sharp spike of arousal as he yanks my hand off of him and pins it to the bed above my head. My other hand soon joins the first, and I've gone from powerful to sacrificial offering all that quickly.

Pressing his hips down, he wedges them between my thighs. I can feel the head of his cock teasing the slick folds of my pussy, but he doesn't push forward any further. Instead, his head drops to my neck, his large body arching in a way that has to be uncomfortable in order to reach it, and his long tongue snakes out to stroke from between my breasts to an erotic point just behind my ear. His hot breath fans over the sensitive lobe.

"Do you come to this willingly, my Lynn?"

My belly clenches at the heat in his raspy voice and I groan, my fingernails scraping against his back. "Yes... now hurry up."

He chuckles and presses his lips against my neck again as his hips push forward driving his cock slowly into me. I moan as my sex stretches with both burning pain and a most exquisite pleasure. The head of his cock and the cool metal of the piercing rubs against the sensitive flesh of my channel in such a way that it makes me clench down hard against its invasion, the muscles fluttering with the first spasm of true pleasure.

Snarling into my hair, Bodi whispers a hoarse apology and then suddenly thrusts forward, plowing deep with a brutal surge that brings my ass up off the bed as I scream. Pain and ecstasy meld in one perfect moment, and on the next breath he withdraws and presses forward again with an urgency that I can feel also quickening in my own blood. My nails dig into the thick muscles of his back, and a ragged moan is torn from him that makes his hips spasm, grinding his cock deeper. Next to my head, I can see his fingers curling into the bed, his claws digging deep even as his other arm slides beneath me to wrap around my waist.

Drawing me flush against him, he begins to rut in earnest, his balls slapping against my ass with every flex of his hips. I can feel the slightest prick of his claws, but it doesn't scare me. The tiny sting makes me moan louder, my legs loop around his thighs as I grind forward, meeting every

thrust. Tiny tremors spark and ignite, making my channel grip hard and pulse around him with every shock as tension winds increasingly tighter deep within me to the point that my legs jerk and quiver against him.

Bodi snarls, his own large body shuddering as he curls over me, his dark hair falling around us like a dense curtain as he pounds desperately into my body. I can feel his cock swelling, hardening further. It twitches and his eyes roll up into the back of his head for a moment. His hand holding down my wrists tightens as his entire body suddenly jerks against mine, throwing him off rhythm into a wild pace, carrying me on a wave of pleasure with him.

A scream tears from my throat as my orgasm snaps like a rubber band, shooting a wave of pulsing fire up my spine with my release. Bodi roars as he thrusts deep and grinds in rapid movements as his cock jumps against the mouth of my womb, spurting hot seed. He doesn't stop grinding, releasing waves of pleasure through me as my orgasm stretches on and on until, at last, his giant body rolls away, his half-flaccid cock slipping out of me with an erotic tug as he curls up onto his side and drags me into his warm embrace.

We lie there for a time to catch our breath until Casper starts to meow impatiently from his carrier in a volume loud enough to be easily heard from the main room. Bodi chuckles and pushes himself upright, his eyes warm with humor and affection as he gazes down at me.

"Come, lanara. Your beast awaits, and I am famished. I will put together a simple breakfast while you care for his needs."

Stretching lazily, I return his smile and slide off the bed after him, my body delightfully sore. That was better than even the fantasy of my dreams had failed to provide. I'm definitely going to take every opportunity to enjoy that again as often as possible.

As I follow him out of the room and release an indignant cat, I idly wonder if his table is big enough to break in with another round.

As it happens, it was, and our lunch was a little delayed. I have zero regrets.

CHAPTER 20



My mate is perfect. Reclining beside her, I'm completely entranced with the vision she makes slumbering sweetly beside me. Her face flushed with sleep, her lips parted and plush, and her eyelashes fanned out against her cheeks like butterfly wings, I've never seen a sight more peaceful or beautiful.

I stroke my hand lightly down her back, marveling at the gift that the gods have granted me, my hand trailing down to her rounded bottom that is fully presented to me since, at some point during her slumber, she turned onto her belly. My hand slaps the marvelous, quilt-covered mound, jolting my mate awake. She squeaks in surprise, and blue eyes fly open to glare at me.

"Wake up!" I greet her cheerfully.

Her lip curling, my Lynn growls in protest. Rolling slightly to her side, she pulls down the quilt further to properly glare up at me. She is such an adorable sight that it just makes me grin wider, my heart filled with joy from the newly forged bloodbond pulsing with life between us.

"What the hell are you doing? I just got to sleep a few hours ago," she grumbles, yanking the quilt up to pull it back over her head as she flops back down onto the pillow. "Go away and wake me at a less insane hour."

Ha! She should know by now that I am not *that* easy to deter!

I chuckle and yank the blanket free and tsk. "Nope. You have been asleep for a good eight hours. It is long enough. We are having an adventure today."

Blue eyes narrow on me with a chilliness that arouses me painfully.

"Bodi..." she says slowly, enunciating carefully as if to make sure that there is no chance of me mistaking her while she attempts to not kill me. The gods have certainly blessed me with her sweet, caring soul, even if she is glaring at me as if she were cursed.

I get the impression that my mate doesn't like mornings.

"I don't care how long I've slept," she growls. "If you value your life, and hope for any kind of adventure or even a repeat of last night, you will walk out the door and pretend that you were never in here..."

Time for a distraction.

I turn and snatch up the cup of coffee waiting behind me and shove it under her nose. She blinks, her eyes widening slightly.

“You brought me coffee in bed,” she mumbles, taking the mug only to stare at it in wonder.

“I did,” I affirm, brushing my lips against the corner of her mouth.

Already I can feel the new links in her bloodbond forging, drawing us closer. I am delighted, but this means that I must hasten with my plans. Garval’s arrival this morning while I allowed my precious mate to sleep in is opportune.

“I’ve put hot water in the bath just over there,” I say, nodding to the tub set up in the corner of the room. Take as long as you like, and then join me in the main room. I was granted a leave of absence from my duties today, and so I wish to make the most of it.”

The corners of her lips curve and her eyes soften. “You would, huh?”

“Nothing would be better,” I assure her. “Now enjoy your coffee and bath. My brother has arrived. I will speak to him now so I can chase him out soon enough.”

The corners of her eyes crinkle with amusement and she chuckles softly as she pushes herself up from the bed and takes the offered cup. She takes a long sip and nods her head, waving me off with one hand. I grin and press another kiss to her cheek before leaving her in peace.

Garval has his back to me when I return to the main room. At first glance, he appears to be staring down at the fire, but it would be more accurate to say that he’s watching the white cat twining around his legs, a mild expression on his face I have never seen before. At the sound of my footsteps, he glances over at me, his face blanking as he raises an eyebrow.

“I take it that your mate is readying herself for the day?” he inquires softly.

As usual, my brother is nothing short of polite curiosity. But he’s always had the easiest temperament in our family, difficult to rouse to anger despite his massive size, except during the heat of battle, and lacking interest when it comes to more carnal things that orcs delight in. My brother makes an odd orc, but there is none I would trust more with my mate.

I nod. “She will be here with us soon but will be occupied for long enough that we are free until then. I appreciate you for agreeing to stay for

a short time so that I may speak with you,” I say sincerely.

He waves a hand dismissively. “It is I who should thank you for this respite. That Mother *requested* that I bring out some teas and basic supplies for your female gave me an excuse to leave the keep, but I’m pleased to remain for a short while to visit, brother. I will have to return to duty soon, though. It is nice to get away from it.” He glances around. “I do miss coming out here,” he admits, so quietly that I nearly miss it.

I examine him thoughtfully, noting the traces of heart weariness I see etched into his face. It has gotten worse since the female, Kassie, left. Something will have to be done soon to help him find a new path that will bring him some joy. I will have to give it some thought because I don’t know what that could possibly be. He tinkers with polishing the bits of gemstones he finds, but that is more a hobby to occupy his hands than a true passion, like how I enjoy carving as a way to pass pleasant evenings and rainy days. Outside of that, I haven’t a clue. My brother is intensely private, but I doubt he’s given much thought to anything outside of the duties that he’s always known.

Despite inheriting a profitable orchard, my grandfather was a high-ranking member of the guard, as was my father. We were raised to expect to be nothing other than exactly that. It is engrained into our identities. As it happens, I enjoy being in the guard as much as I love my orchards, even more so since Orgath relaxes my duties during certain times of the year when I’m engaged in pruning and harvesting the trees. These things give my heart pleasure, which is only increased by the presence of my mate. I want my brother to know that satisfaction.

Garval walks over to one of the chairs and sits down, his dark brows arching as he meets my eyes. “What did you wish to speak to me about?”

“My mate,” I reply, sitting in the other chair, turning my body just enough so that I face him. “I’ve been granted today as a reprieve, but tomorrow I return to my duties. Orgath seems to think that Lynn will be safe enough out while I am gone attending to my duties, but I would be more comfortable if there were someone here to watch over her and help her feel comfortable while I’m gone.”

My brother settles back, a look of surprise on his face, and scratches his jaw with his claws. “That shouldn’t be a problem. I can trade shifts with one of the guards who has been looking to free up his evenings to

pursue a female he's taken interest in. And you just want me to... sit here?"

I shrug. "However you wish to occupy yourself is fine with me. Just do not leave my mate alone. And try not to get in her way too much," I add. "She mentioned wanting to try some ideas for her café when it opens, so I imagine she will wish to have the cooking area to herself without an orc underfoot."

"I will keep that in mind," Garval replies dryly, his lips twitching with amusement. "Your female will no doubt inform me when I am in her way. She seems afraid of nothing."

I grin. "She is fearless indeed, and all mine. Which brings me to my next request. Do you have any polished rhodonite? I know that there was a deposit found in the quarry south of here."

My brother looks surprised at my question and slowly nods. "I do, as a matter of fact. I even have a particularly nice one I have put in a setting. What are you up to, Bodi?"

I give a pretense of being injured. "Why must you assume that I'm up to anything? You make it sound like I am continuously plotting."

"Because in one fashion or another, you are," Garval replies flatly.

I chuckle. "Perhaps so," I agree. "In this case, I am not so much up to something as I'm planning for something very special, something for which I will need your skill... and Mother's."

Understanding dawns, and then my brother grins. "Oh, I see. So you really need my help then."

I narrow my eyes at him. I know he's just toying with me. As my little brother, he takes particular joy in it, just as I have while mercilessly tormenting him—all quite affectionately, of course. I would kill anyone who would hurt him, and I know without a doubt he would do the same for me. As for Erra, she is a thorn in both of our sides for the sheer joy of it, but she's her mate's problem now and has been for years. Thank the gods.

"Fine. I will owe you," I concede, and his grin widens.

"I will hold you to that if I ever need your particular skills at carving." His face clouds with pain, and his smile twists into a grimace. "That may never be necessary, but just maybe I will someday get the opportunity."

I nod in silent commiseration. I don't try to cajole him or speak words in hope of making him feel better. I just quietly lend my support so that he knows that I am here for him, come whatever may be.

Garval says, breaking the silence stretching on between us and rises to his feet. "I will take the stones to Mother. I assume you have the other pieces?"

I nod and dig a pouch out of my pocket. Inside is some of my best work that I started as soon as Lynn left. Four perfect claws, silky smooth with spiraling swirls carved onto their sides. Garval takes one out and inspects, his expression softening once again.

"Your finest work, brother."

"Nothing less for my mate," I rasp, my throat uncharacteristically tight with emotion. I clear my throat and nod toward the pouch. "I wish to present it to her following the Lantern Labyrinth. Please inform Mother."

He gives me a look of understanding and drops the claw back into the pouch before pocketing it.

"I shall. In fact, I will stop at my cottage to pick up the stones and then deliver the lot to Mother before I return to duty," he says quietly.

I nod my thanks, not trusting my voice, as I follow him to the door, seeing him out. Seeing to it that the door is latched firmly behind him, I feel a brush of fur around my ankles and glance down at the white menace who has tormented me all morning. The demon lifts one paw, spreading the little bean-like toes of its foot as tiny claws emerge. With a quick snap of his paw, he strikes. My eyes water as the beast attacks my foot, his body curling around as he attempts once more to sink his teeth into the flesh.

And I thought Haith's teething days were a nightmare.

Growling, I scoop the menace up into my arms, glaring down at him as yellow eyes meet my gaze, and the demon spawn begins to purr.

"Of course you would be a contrary thing. No wonder my Lynn favors you so, as she confuses me as well. You're fortunate, since that prevents me from feeding you to Haith," I huff as I tuck the monster beneath my arm. "Now come along. We will fix something nice from the supplies to feed your mistress."

Casper meows insistently, and I give the furball a dour look.

"Yes, and you," I grunt in agreement as I walk over to the cooking area.

CHAPTER 21



LYNN

A steaming cup of coffee and a soak in a warm bath at the same time have done wonders for my mood. By the time I get out, I'm not only brilliantly rosy all over but also feel like a million bucks. And for someone who absolutely isn't a morning person, that's saying something. Pulling soft pink leggings on and a sweater about three shades deeper than I bought before returning to Ov'Gorg, I stroll out into the main room, my eyes searching out my impossible orc, and immediately swallow back a laugh.

Bodi has a platter of food prepared and placed ready on the table. It doesn't merely sit there, however, my big bad orc appears to be viciously guarding while he eyes Casper, who circles the table with demanding mewls.

"Go on, I have given you yours already," Bodi snarls, only to have the cat become even louder.

This time I can't hold back my laughter, though I attempt to muffle it a bit with the sleeve of my sweater. Orc hearing being what it is, his eyes immediately snap to me and then widen in horror.

"Blessed gods, woman. What have you done to yourself?" he demands, rushing to my side, the food left forgotten.

Casper immediately leaps for the table, but I rush forward and pluck him off again and set him on the floor while I fetch his kibble. As I pour the dry cat food into his dish, I gave Bodi an arched look over my shoulder.

"What do you mean, what did I do to myself?" I ask him.

He gestures to his skin and shakes his head. "You're all red, like you boiled yourself alive! Did you see that there were jugs of cooling water left for you too?"

My brow puckers because of course I saw them. I even used them.

"Of course. And thank you, they helped me get the temperature just right," I say sweetly, sitting down at the table.

The platter is filled with boiled eggs, more of the fat, spicy sausage links that have been fried up crisp, chewy bread that orcs enjoy, cheese,

and a bowl of simple porridge with honey and spiced fruit set on top. I can feel saliva gathering in my mouth as I imagine just what I can do with a few good laying hens to keep me in eggs, chopped meat, and some decent cheese. Here, the food would always be guaranteed fresh, and my little foodie heart wants to crow with delight. My orc did all of this for me? I could seriously kiss him right about now for this.

And then Bodi sets another cup of coffee by my elbow. This time, I grab ahold of his tunic before he can straighten and plant a kiss on him that has him growling with desire until I gently poke him in the side with the fork sitting on the table beside me when his roaming fingers begin to attempt to undress me.

He grunts at the impact and glances down accusingly at the fork. Suddenly, his expression shifts and his lips curve into a devious smile. Raising his hands in surrender, he withdraws and leans back while I lift my tined weapon and point it at him in warning.

“You are right, of course, my lanara,” he agrees easily. “We eat first and then I can turn my appetite to far more wondrous delicacies.”

I laugh and shake my head. “Nope, I just got cleaned up and dressed. You said we have a busy day ahead of us, so that’s what we’re doing. No funny business allowed.”

He raises his eyebrows, but the look he gives me is filled with such intensity and dark heat that for a moment I forget what exactly my point had been.

Oh yes, eating. With a happy moan, I pop a bite of food into my mouth, savoring its flavor. Everything tastes fresher and richer in Ov’Gorg, and, as I’m its newest resident, I’m not about to complain any about that. I can feel Bodi’s eyes on me, as I eat and a few times I even meet his gaze as I enjoy one particular morsel or another.

With his promises of further carnal feasts, I’m surprised at his restraint. Every now and then, I can see an erotic shiver run through him, making me feel incredibly powerful, but he somehow manages to keep himself under tight control. It isn’t until the last bite of food is consumed that he snaps to his feet and pushes the platter and silverware out of the way. In one quick movement, he lifts me up onto the table surface and begins to work my clothes off.

Large hands cup and stroke my breasts as they are bared to him, plucking at the nipples with just the right amount of pressure to make me

squirm. Only when they are blushing bright pink and furled tight, my skin shining slightly with perspiration, does he flatten the width of his palm in the center of my chest. With perfectly controlled strength, he pushes me back against the table as he pulls my pants and underwear down together from around my hips and slides them off of my legs, one and then the other.

His lips slide down my belly, leaving a trail of hot, damp kisses. His tongue strokes my inner thighs, lapping at the slick there before closing around my exposed sex, sucking at the sensitive flesh. I moan and rock against his mouth, taking my pleasure. The suction is interrupted every so often by the firm lap of his tongue and the deep dive of its considerable length inside of me, as if he's trying to capture every drop of my arousal. Although my entire body hums with building pleasure, I have zero doubts that he's the one who is savoring by the growl that vibrates through him.

That sharp orgasm that shatters through me is sudden, taking me by surprise. I lay limp on the table, shivering with the aftereffects when he rises over me with a grin, his green eyes dancing. He swats my thigh and chuckles as he steps back from the table. Although his erection strains the front of his pants, he makes no effort to undress. Instead, he slowly licks his lips with a purr.

"Delicious," he murmurs as he stretches contently before heading into the main room.

I stare after him in surprise. That was it?

Sliding off the table, I yank my underwear and pants back up and follow after him, my eyes narrowing as I watch him proceed to bank the fire. As if sensing my eyes boring into him, Bodi looks up and nods toward my boots.

"Dress warmly," he advises cheerfully, turning his attention back to the hearth.

"But... what about you?" I blurt out.

He looks back over at me and raises his eyebrow.

"What about me? I received exactly what I was after," he murmurs, his tongue swiping over his bottom lip, and then grins. "And it was better to feast upon than even the finest elvish delicacy."

I gape at him, heat rising into my face, and yet, at the same time, I feel ridiculously pleased. I clear my throat and fetch my boots. Right next to them, I see my hat and gloves hanging nearby, warming. I raise my

eyebrow and grab them as well. He really does intend for me to dress warmly.

“I take it that we’re going somewhere?” I shoot him a curious look.

His grin widens, and he inclines his head in agreement. “I thought to show you around my orchards and then head up to Stronghold Hill so that you can see more of your new home territory.”

My nose wrinkles a bit. I do want to see Stronghold Hill. Kassie’s pictures that she showed me, after she returned home and got the film developed, were gorgeous. Just...ugh, touring trees.

An amused look crosses Bodi’s face. “Do you have something against trees or hills?” he teases.

“Stronghold Hill sounds lovely,” I object. “I’m just not much into admiring trees. I enjoy a good apple as much as the next person, but strolling around an orchard to admire the leaves changing colors is just not my thing.”

A wonderfully rumble chuckle leaves him, and he shakes his head. “Your people do this?”

At my nod, he laughs again. Fuck, I can’t get enough of that wonderful sound, even when he’s irritating the hell out of me—or laughing at me. I narrow my eyes at him, but he lifts a hand before I can get out a word.

“Not to speak ill of it, but such a thing would not occur to an orc. We would rather curl up with our mates by a fire or enjoy a feast with our female on our lap than admire leaves. That is for later,” he promises with a wink.

My lips tip upward as I imagine Bodi tucking me onto his lap in such a manner, feeding me bites of food, and my chest warms pleasantly. It’s not just the sex speaking, but surprisingly, despite all the crap Andrew put me through and three years of keeping my distance from men and all romantic entanglements, I really do enjoy being with Bodi.

No, that’s too shallow of a description for what I feel when I’m with him. He makes me feel alive. It’s like he’s the maddening other half of my heart and soul, completing me regardless of whether or not I want to hug him or throttle him. Truth is... I can’t imagine my life without him. And that’s frightening because I feel like I’ve been down this road before only to be disappointed. That he would want to spend time with me in such a way, not just hauling me along because it’s the thing to do and then ignoring me, makes me feel wanted and appreciated. He’s not suggesting a

walk around the orchard to impress or distract me, and I appreciate that. Bodi is nothing like my ex-husband. This tells me more than anything that we just fit together.

“Thank goodness,” I laugh, tugging on my boots. “Because, honestly, I can’t think of anything more boring. I mean the view here is beautiful, but I don’t exactly feel a need to traipse through it unless there is a reason for it.”

His eyes crinkle at the corners with mirth. “Good, because I don’t plan on doing anything of the sort. We will be riding Haith so I can show you the main paths through the orchards.” At my furrowed brow, he raises a finger. “There is a reason for it. Since you are staying here, I believe it is necessary for you to familiarize yourself with the lay of the land. This means knowing how to get through the orchard to the cottage or to cut directly to the main road leading to the village. Knowing your way around can be the difference between life and death.”

I stare at him, a niggle of worry fluttering in me. “Is it that dangerous?” I ask quietly.

“No more than any other place, I suspect,” he replies easily with a shrug. “Not every being in Ov’Gorg is friendly, but an attack is rare.” His smile hardens, his eyes turning flinty. “And there are few who would be so foolish as to dare to intrude onto the territory of an orc, much less *my* home.”

There is a threat of violence in his voice, but he oozes so much protectiveness as he stares down at me that it makes me feel as if I’ve just been wrapped in a warm quilt and hugged close. Especially when his eyes warm again and I practically bask in it as he wraps my coat around me and buttons it up. Every touch is carried out with a gentle tenderness that I wouldn’t have expected if I hadn’t felt him lovingly caress every inch of my body earlier.

I smile, watching his large fingers on the buttons. I feel like I’m being completely pampered. When did that last happen? Certainly nothing to this degree. I can’t remember anyone buttoning my coat since I became an adult.

I close my hand around his as he fastens the last button and give it a squeeze. His eyes light up at the gesture, and his hand rises to stroke his knuckles over my cheek. The delicate touch of his callused hand sends a ripple of pleasure through me, but it is his kiss, when he drops his head

and claims my lips, that sends me reeling. The sensation of his thick lips against mine and the gentle pressure from his tusks stoke my desire higher, even as my heart warms with the love filling it.

When he finally breaks away, we are both breathing hard, and the bulge in his pants has returned with a vengeance.

“We will resume this later,” he growls.

He turns away from me and I feel a pang of regret, but I understand. It is probably a good thing that he stopped things. The temptation is too great to just spend our day together whiling away in bed. We will never get anything done if we can’t control ourselves. The look he sends me over his shoulder is full of heat and promise as he steps outside. Pulling on my gloves and hat, I wrap a scarf loosely around my neck and follow after him.

Bodi is waiting for me when I step outside.

“Wait for me here while I fetch Haith,” he murmurs. “I’m suddenly very eager to get this over with. The sooner we leave, the sooner we get back and return to more... inspiring things.” He gives me a panty-dropping grin before striding back behind the cottage, leaving me alone.

Craning my neck, I casually look around as I wander over to a nearby tree and lean against it. The trees here are massive and clearly very old. I wonder just how long this orchard has been in his family. Clearly it was planted quite a long time ago unless trees grow differently in Ov’Gorg. I’m pretty certain that the trunk I’m leaning against is wide enough that I would have no hope of getting my arms around it. Even the branches spreading wide overhead are at very least as thick as my body, some even more so.

Branches rattle and creak as a breeze blows, and I’m suddenly grateful for bundling up. If we’re going to be spending the day riding, I would ~~www~~definitely get chilled quickly. Bodi’s voice drifts over to me, and I look over, my lips bowing as I see him striding toward me with one large hand resting on the delfass’s back. He meets my eyes and smiles as he nears. I push away from the tree as he approaches when I hear a loud, splintering crack that makes my head shoot up. A bellow fills my ears and then I’m yanked off of my feet as Bodi snatches me up into his arms and, with strength rippling through him, leaps as far as he can to the side as a large limb breaks free and crashes down.

The breath is knocked out of me as our bodies hit the ground, and a sharp sting lashes my face. Large hands turn me against a broad chest, and Bodi murmurs softly to me, his hands petting me reassuringly. I blink my eyes and manage to draw in a shuddering breath, my fingers gripping his vest. His lovely face is filled with concern as he stares down at me, and he winces as he trails his fingers in the air above where my face hurts.

“What happened?” I wheeze.

He tips his head and frowns up at the trees.

“A branch fell,” he growls. A tremor racks him, and his arms tighten around me. “The windstorm we had three days ago must have weakened it. *Fuck*,” he growls the curse as if he had been born human, making my lips twitch despite the anxiety still racing through me from the close call. “If I had been any further from you...” His eyes squeeze shut, and he silently snarls.

I pat his arm gently. My side hurts a bit from where we hit the ground, despite his best effort to take the brunt of the fall, and my face stings like a bitch, but, when I pull off a glove and investigate, I don’t find more than a couple of drops of blood.

Slowly, he eases us into a seated position, his arms tightly enclosed around me so that I’m still pressed close to his chest, and I’m able to get a look at the damage. My eyes widen. He wasn’t kidding about it being a close call! An enormous branch lies dangerously close to us, with several broken twigs littered around where I was lying.

“Shit,” I whisper.

Bodi growls, lifting me up into his arms. “We will delay our outing until later. Let’s get you inside.”

Haith’s eyes follow us, his large body sinking down to sprawl in front of the cottage as I’m carried back inside.

Placing me gently into the chair, Bodi carefully removes my coat, scarf and hat, shaking the debris from them before taking my gloves and putting everything away. I shiver a bit as I watch him, more from shock than anything. I’m not the only one. Bodi’s shoulders are tense as he bends down and stirs up the fire once more before retreating into the cooking area. As much as I want to watch what he’s doing, I feel completely drained. Besides, the heat feels good as it slowly crawls through me. I barely notice when he returns several minutes later with a bowl of warm water and cloth.

I sigh with the first brush of warm water against my face, and then hiss when the cloth trails over my scratches. He whispers a soft apology under his breath as he winces, but he continues to bathe the scratches with light, patient strokes until he's satisfied that they're clean. Only then does he set the bowl and cloth aside and wrap a quilt over me, gathering me up into his arms and plucking me up from the chair so that he can sit, cuddling me close on his lap.

Grateful, I sink into his warm embrace, happy that the side of my face that's not injured is pressed against his tunic-covered chest so that it doesn't hurt. I rub my cheek as I settle comfortably, my body relaxing completely against his as his huge hand strokes over the blanket, down my back.

"I'll get out there and prune those trees," he grumbles. "Put it off too damn long. I'm sorry, lanara." His voice chokes and I stroke a hand against his chest.

"It's okay. Just a scratch and a few bruises. We are fine." I tip my head back to look up into his face. "I've been meaning to ask, what does lanara mean, anyway?"

He smiles down at me. "It is in the old tongue. It refers to the sweet feelings that lies in one's heart."

My eyebrows arch. "All that, huh?"

He chuckles, cuddling me closer. "For the most part. Now rest and let me hold you. This is a better way to pass our day anyway. I suppose that the gods sent their message. We will get to our little tour when you're not aching. It wouldn't be a pleasant way to ride."

"Sounds like a plan," I mumble against his chest. I lightly poke the thigh muscle. "Since we are staying in, how about picking up one of your books over there and reading to me?"

He smiles and reaches over the side table to pick up a particularly hefty leatherbound book and opens it at the beginning. His wonderfully rumbling voice surrounds me as he begins to read.

He doesn't even realize that, given a choice of how to spend a romantic afternoon, I would choose this over any fancy vacation or dinner. This is more meaningful than any gesture, and I'm certain I fall even more in love with him as he passes hour after hour reading aloud and holding me close.

CHAPTER 22



BODI

I linger in the main room as Garval removes his outer vest and lowers himself into a chair. I should be leaving now that he is here, I know that, but I'm anxious about leaving my mate while I'm attending to my duties at the keep. Especially with the scare we had yesterday. The fact that my female came so close to death rouses every protective instinct within me.

My mate. Every part of me warms, most especially my old warrior's heart, at those two simple words. I want to pull Lynn into my lap and nuzzle her short-cropped, sweet-smelling hair as we travel, and it is a difficult desire to resist. Especially not after she embraced me today and our bodies lined up for one perfect moment. I am greedy to feel her arms around me again, already trying to think of other ways that I might enjoy it again. There is no touch like the one from one's mate. Now I understand why Orgath obsessively holds his own mate so close to him. I wish for that.

I know deep in my gut with all certainty that Lynn is it. There is no doubt in my mind that she is that one elusive female that I thought I would never find—my bloodbound. At first, I was so glad to feel that spark of connection that I was determined to have her whether she was my bloodbonded mate or not. But now that I feel the first promising wisps of the bond waiting to be forged, it's all I can do to rein in my eagerness enough to properly carry out the bonding ritual. I may inadvertently get some things wrong every now and then, but I refuse to mess that up.

A loud sigh interrupts my musings, and Garval directs an irritated look at me. "Don't you have something you're supposed to be doing? Or do you plan to just moon about here? If so, I will leave so that I can go occupy my time elsewhere."

"No," I growl. "I'm leaving. Just... watch out for her. Maybe keep her indoors until I have time to prune the trees. I don't want another mishap with them."

My brother raises his eyebrows. "With the trees?"

“One fell and nearly killed her yesterday. I should have had the trees closest to the property pruned for after the harvest,” I mutter. “Especially after that storm came through.”

An amused snort escapes my brother. “That little gust? You think that damaged the tree? Our apple trees are bred to withstand far more than that! I have never heard of a branch just falling. These trees are notoriously strong growers and a pain in the ass to remove limbs from, if you remember correctly. I certainly have enough memories assisting Father out here when we were orclings.”

My mouth turns down in a puzzled frown. My brother is not wrong, but that doesn’t make it at all improbable either. I release a soft grunt as I pull my vest on and secure the buttons. “There is still time to get it done, regardless. I will stop and speak to the head of our usual crew who takes care of it and have him send some males out.”

Garval inclines his head in agreement and settles back, his eyes sliding closed, dismissing me. I’m tempted to wake him and remind him that he can’t watch my mate from behind his eyelids, but I hold back. I do not blame him for wanting a little bit more rest. The hour is still ungodly early. I wouldn’t be up yet myself if I didn’t have to. I would much rather be curled up in bed beside my sweet female, breathing in her sweet scent.

Right now, if she had her café ready, she could have accompanied me and I would have seen her to her work before leaving her safely within those walls, within the reach of the keep.

Cursing under my breath, I stalk out, shutting the door firmly behind me, heading out for Haith’s stable. I’m not surprised to find out that the delfass is no more inclined to depart without Lynn than I am. He turns his head, glancing repeatedly at the cottage as if waiting, his ears flattening when I give him the signal to continue walking from where I’m mounted on his back. A low growl rumbles from his chest, but he leaves the cottage behind us, his muscles tense with reluctance, making for a rougher ride than his usual limber pace.

The trip to the keep seems to take an inordinately long amount of time, the stress of separation from my unclaimed mate wearing my perfect control thin. It may also be because Haith is moving at half-speed up the rocky hillside despite my commands. He’s almost to the point of outright ignoring me as he keeps glancing back. This is doing nothing to improve

my own unsettled feelings. It has such a strong effect on me that by the time we arrive at the village my jaw is clenched tight.

It only gets worse when we pass through the square. While it is still too early for the morning market, there are a number of orcs out preparing for the day's business. Remembering that I needed to speak to the pruning crew, I direct Haith over to a number of market stalls near the outer rear edge where males, and some females, hire out their skills. There are even a few trade groups such as carpenters and masons, and those who tend to the orchards in the fall and the planting during appropriate seasons. Haith bristles at our approach, his tail lashing angrily. He's in quite a mood today so I dismount and approach the weather-hardened male who leads the outfit. An older male with a leaner frame that helps him move up and down the trees, his amber eyes sharpen with interest as I make my way toward him.

"Ironclaw," he greets me in a raspy voice. "I expected to see you earlier. Are you finally requiring assistance at your orchard?"

I nod and explain what I need done as I keep an eye on Haith to make sure he behaves. Normally, the delfass would stretch out, content to laze in the early morning sunlight while I conduct business, but instead he stands there with his tail tucked against his legs and his head dropped low. He swings his head from side to side, his nostrils flaring as he snarls.

Disturbed by his behavior, I conclude my business, handing the male the usual required fee. He barks out an order loud enough to hurt my ears due to my close proximity, but I don't show any discomfort as the crew moves in. I don't recognize most of the males, since the crew seems to change every season, though they seem to be as random as they come, varying in sizes. My fingers twitch at my side, the mingling scents of the males making me peculiarly anxious. Enough that I'm eager to get out of there, as is Haith until I direct him toward the keep and the delfass begins to behave in a manner that reminds me of his juvenile years when I trained him as a mount.

He's a damn stubborn creature. He is also acting like an infuriating idiot, too, as I attempt to put him in a stall. Every time I try to shut the door, he's turning around and attempting to push his way back out again until I am snarling and cursing at him while he growls back at me.

What has gotten into him? He's never such an uncooperative brute! Since stopping in the market, he's behaving worse than ever.

“Haith, quit!” I hiss as I give him another firm shove.

By some miracle, I manage to get it closed and wince as the stable seems to amplify his every snarl and roar. As I walk into the keep, still faintly hearing the distant sound of Haith’s complaints, I decide that I don’t envy what the stable hands are going to have to deal with today. Not that I imagine many of the guards are going to enjoy my own company. My irritation has been roused to uncommon levels. I know it is due to having my mate so close and not completing the bond.

While fully establishing a mating bond can happen the first time a mated pair joins, it is rare because the male and female have to fully give themselves to each other for it to happen. Getting the couple into that frame of mind is what the ceremony is for, and unlike Orgath, my mother would never forgive me if I skipped over having the ceremony witnessed by all of our kin—if not the entire clan. Since I don’t want to be murdered by that impossible female, I will just suffer instead.

My condition must be apparent though because the eyes of the guards follow me with concern. Even Orgath does a second take when I come into his study, his brow furrowing.

“You look like shit,” he observes with a displeased growl. “I thought you would have taken advantage of the time I permitted for you to be away and secured your mating bond.”

I shrug and pick up the daily roster, scanning the list of males under my charge for the morning. My concentration is shot.

“It’s not that simple. You recall how offended everyone was when you took Sammi for your mate without the appropriate feast where all of your kin could be present. You were forgiven because you were living apart from us at that time. I have no such excuse. Never wanted to be an exile more,” I grumble. I sigh and raise a hand to rub my temple. “It will be taken care of. Garval took my tokens to our mother for the mating collar to be crafted. Until then, I just wait.”

“But it will be soon,” Orgath insisted. “You’re not much good to me like this.”

“Soon,” I agree. “I think my mother is planning to have the feast on the same night following the Lantern Labyrinth.”

My cousin nods, impressed. “That would be a fortuitous blessing for you and your mate.”

I nod. "Until then, I need to know if we've heard anything more of the Bright Bloods."

Orgath shakes his head, his arms crossing over his chest in irritation. "As quickly as we heard of it, they've all disappeared according to reports I've recently received. Afraid, I'd wager," he snorts. "Nothing has arisen to cause concern, however. We can continue with the Lantern Labyrinth without worry, I think."

"Good," I murmur.

Nothing will disrupt my mating. Gods help any Bright Blood who tries.

CHAPTER 23



LYNN

Having a big, burly warrior for a babysitter isn't all that bad. I had mixed feelings when Bodi told me that his brother was going to come and watch over me while he was overseeing things at the keep. I was worried about getting stuck with a moody male who just glowered at me all day, resenting having to be here. In contrast to my expectations, Garval is a surprise. The moment I stumbled out of the bedroom in search of coffee, he kindly waited for me to fuel up before introducing himself and actually sat at the table with me, engaging in conversation while I more leisurely sipped my second cup.

Now, he's hovering just behind me, watching with interest and a fair amount of amusement as I make an enormous mess of Bodi's kitchen. I wrinkle my nose at the spilled flour and the yolk floating in a broken eggshell that I just accidentally dropped on the counter. The recipe book that I jam packed with all of my best ideas while cooling my heels in my apartment is spread out beside me, already bearing a few smudges.

I give the dough in the bowl in front of me a speculative look. I *think* it looks like it should. How hard is making cinnamon rolls, anyway? If teenagers can make them at the mall for minimum wage, I figure this should be breeze. But as I'm looking at this mess, it occurs to me that the yumminess that is Cinnabon quite likely arrived frozen because trying to get this dough made right is like floating along in the second circle of hell. I'm not so confident that I can do this. My lips pinch together as I run my hand down the page again.

"Maybe it would just be easier to kidnap a baker after all," I mutter to myself. "I would prefer just to hire like a normal person, but how would I even do cross-portal help wanted signs anyway? It will have to be a kidnapping because I'll never be even as good as a bad baker."

A masculine snort erupts from behind me. "What exactly is it that you are trying to do over there? It looks fine enough and smells good," he adds.

That surprises me because most of the male orcs I've met in Ov'Gorg are not fond at all of sweet things. Garval is like a supersized anti-orc, and

I'm guessing one with a sweet tooth that doesn't stop. He reminds me so much of Kassie in that way that I can't help but to grin over at him.

What a shame that I hadn't been able to get her to come over with me. Now that she and Jason are done, I can't think of anyone who would treat my friend better. I feel bad having Bodi discourage his brother now that Jason is out of the picture. Of course, as long as she's hooked on him, Garval won't have a shot. And knew that then when I spoke to Bodi of the matter, and that hasn't changed—not while she's living there, waiting on him.

Sooner or later, she will get tired of it. Hopefully, it will happen by the time I get her over here again. And that *will* happen. I'll just have to wait until then before I can set up a trap for the couple and get Cupid's Arrow to work on them. All this plotting makes me feel like a little selfish, but I really want her to have what I've found with Bodi. Just without the sarcasm and the mouth that won't quit.

"Cinnamon rolls," I tell him, pointing at the picture in the recipe book. "Or that is what they should be, anyway."

He grunts and narrows his eyes. "I cannot read your human script. It's very frustrating."

"Yeah, you can say that again," I agree.

Aside from what I brought with me, I'm unable to read anything else in the cottage. It's the height of frustration for me as someone who's always read pretty much anything I can get my hands on.

He looks at me askance, and I smile because I know that he's trying to work out whether I literally want him to repeat himself. He shakes his head, and I can just see him fortifying himself and moving on.

A merciless chuckle escapes me before I can stop it, but thankfully he ignores it as he starts flipping through the book to get a look at the pictures of all the yummy little pastries. His eyes brighten a bit with obviously piqued interest.

"Perhaps," he murmurs, "if you read everything aloud, we can work through it together. Tell me how you started, and we will work our way through it together until we arrive where we currently are with your dough."

I give him a curious look but drag the book closer to me so that it sits between us, the bowl tucked right behind it.

As I read and point out everything that I've used until this point, Garval grunts and grumbles to himself, his head occasionally nodding in response to one of my observations. Suddenly, he holds up a hand, interrupting my rapid flow of words, and picks up the bag of flour.

"I think I see your problem," he says after a minute.

He grabs one of the discarded measuring cups and adds a bit more flour to the dough, mixing it until it reaches the right consistency. I rattle out the next series of instructions and he gets to work rolling it out evenly across our workspace with just a few swipes of the rolling pin.

I get down lower to get a good look at just how perfectly distributed the volume of the dough is. I'm honestly jealous because what he did with such casual effortlessness, I would've been getting down and eyeing it a half-dozen times while rolling it out and still probably wouldn't have done as well.

Without needing to be prompted, Garval takes the knife and begins to cut symmetrical long strips of dough just as I had instructed. Each of them is roughly two fingers in width—human fingers, that is, not orc fingers. From there, we get to work spreading sweet cinnamony filling down the length of each strip before rolling them tightly back up and setting them side by side in the pan.

I chuckle as I look at my pathetic attempts. They stand out so starkly against his perfect little spirals that they look like sad little cinnamon-encrusted blobs. They aren't something I would be able to put in front of a customer, but I'm betting they will still taste pretty nice. With that in mind, we double-check the heat of the oven before sliding the pan in. In no time, mouthwatering smells fill the kitchen, warming my insides with every inhale. Pouring another cup of coffee from the pot warming on the stove, I moan softly and drag in a deep breath as I sink down into the chair I vacated at the table.

"Damn, that smells like a baked orgasm to me," I announce with a happy sigh as I take a deep sip of my coffee at the very same moment that Casper's fluffy little body sprawls over my feet.

Cup three has never tasted better, and I've also got a foot warmer. It's a shame I don't have a cinnamon roll to go with all of this. Maybe with cup four. That would truly be bliss.

A chair scrapes, and I hear Garval join me at the table. My eyes slowly open to find him staring at me with an amused smile on his face.

“I can see why my brother has bonded to you,” he observes. “You are both very much alike.”

I snicker and shake my head. “I love Bodi to death, but you have it all wrong. We’re nothing alike. The male has a talent for getting under my skin and making me just a little nuts.”

His smile widens. “Yes, you seem to have that effect on each other. You are both very passionate in the way you enjoy life. It will make you good mates, even if you argue.”

“Mates, huh?” I arch an eyebrow at him over my cup.

His smile drops, and he regards me quietly for a moment. I’m starting to get nervous until he begins to speak again.

“If you do not wish to be Bodi’s mate, you need to tell him. My brother loves you very much and will claim you in the manner of our traditions, because that’s just the way he is. Tell him now so that he doesn’t embarrass himself.”

I stare back at him. “I mean, I love him, but isn’t that a little soon?”

Garval shrugs. “It is the nature of the people of our world. We find our mates quick if we are fortunate enough for the gods to set them in our path. He doesn’t need time to be certain of his bond with you, and in fact is eager to claim you and prove that much to you. What’s more, he will never permit himself to be separated from you for the rest of your lives once he’s secured the mate bond, even more so if it proves to be one of the rare bloodbonds.”

Expelling a long breath, I meet his eye. “That is very sweet but also a little intense. I’m just getting comfortable in our relationship. I didn’t know it would be progressing that fast.”

“You have some control,” Garval reminds me. “Just tell him that you are not ready to mate yet. You will be moved elsewhere until your cottage is ready for you.”

“Wait. I would have to leave?”

I don’t want to be separated from him again. Especially not now. Just the thought and my heart squeezes painfully.

Garvels’ expression turns stony. With his muddy green coloring and severe features, he looks like something from an old fantasy novel. And not the hero. “Would you force my brother to endure being in such intimate and close proximity to you when he’s fighting the beginnings of

the bond? That would be unnecessarily cruel. You don't strike me as a female who enjoys the suffering of males."

I shake my head, guilt creeping in because that's exactly how it sounds. "No. Of course not. I just have a hard time imagining not being with him. It was hard enough when I had to return home and pack everything. The separation ate at me whenever I couldn't keep myself distracted. I don't want to be separated from him further."

"A strong bond has already been forming between you," he observes quietly. "Understand that I do not wish for you or my brother to get hurt—but I would rather watch that small hurt than great suffering from your loss. You will need to make your decision soon."

I stare down at my hands with uncertainty. Fuck. It shouldn't be so easy to make this hard. I know how I feel about Bodi, but I'm also scared shitless. While nothing has ever felt so right for me, and the idea of being claimed in such a primal way is exciting, this whole thing and how fast it's moving is what makes me afraid. I'm afraid of making another mistake.

"I'm afraid," I whisper. "What if I choose wrong and we both end up hurt by it?"

Garval's expression softens, and his large hand stretches across the table to engulf my clasped hands. "Do you love him?"

I draw in a deep breath and let it out, quieting my mind for a moment just to feel. "Yes. I do. And that's what scares me."

He cocks his head. "Why? Love is what is important."

"It's too fast," I mutter. "What if something changes? What if he realizes that he doesn't like who I am? I can't go through that again, being with someone who hates everything about me and works hard to change it, to mold me into who he wants me to be."

He gives a deep bark of laughter that startles me, but his hand squeezes over mine reassuringly. Brown eyes meet mine, filled with warmth.

"My brother is exasperating and something of a fool at times, but he would never want a mate he would have to work to change. It's not in his nature, or in our nature as a species. Perhaps we are lazy." He grins. "If he feels a bond with you, and wants you, it is because you are perfect for him in every way." He releases my hand, his grin widening as he settles back into his chair. "Not that you won't want to murder him every now and then, for which you have my sincerest sympathy being tied to such a male. But you can rest assured that he will never want anyone else."

I swallow back the emotion lodged in my throat. It could be so easy to doubt him. But all I have to do is think of how that silly orc shows his love. Some of them are aggravating as hell, but everything is demonstrative, even his need to attract me with whatever he's wearing even as he blithely ignores the fact that it attracts everyone else too. He's so fixated on my responses and my pleasures. I'm grateful he's toned down the clothing thing, even though it no longer really bothers me now that I've noticed that he doesn't so much as look at his admirers. He may be flashy, but he never fails to let me know how much I'm the center of his world. We work well together, and Garval's right—he's never done anything to try to change me in the slightest.

A lifetime of this male's devotion, to wake up next to him every morning and enjoying the full weight of his focus and affection, to spend lazy days curled up together and adventurous days exploring with Haith, to snipe and tease and love, and to make a family with him—yes to all of it!

Garval must see it in my expression because he chuckles. "There it is—the love for my brother. You see now that you want to be his mate."

"You're right," I sigh, my lips curling as I meet his gaze. "I do want to be his mate."

The old-fashioned winding timer I brought from home dings, and I laugh at its inopportune timing. Or maybe its timing is perfect now that I've worked everything out, reminding me that the now matters and the future awaits. This is the beginning of everything.

Going over the oven, I pull on my oven mitts and open it up, the fragrant scent of cinnamon rolls rolling out. My mouth waters as I lift out the pan and set it on a protective mat on the counter for the treats to cool. A stomach rumbles loudly and I giggle at the realization that it's not mine. Looking over my shoulder, I grin at Garval standing right behind me, his eyes focused on the pan with pure hunger.

"Let's let these cool and then we can have one before we start on the scones. I have a list..."

Garval's head whips up and his hand goes out, silencing me. I blink in surprise, stung until I see the way that his eyes are narrowed, tracking over the ceiling above us. There's the softest creak, and he growls menacingly. The hairs on my arm rise, and I nearly jump when he suddenly spins around and stalks toward the door. He flings it open as he grabs the large

battleax that leans there against the wall. An ax that I couldn't lift even using both hands, he swings up over his shoulder as he strides out.

I really should stay in the kitchen where he left me, but I want to know what the hell is going on too. Not that I'm an idiot. I won't be getting in the way or even going outside. I just want to peek out the door to see what's going on.

Walking as quietly as I can, I hurry to the door and peak outside. Garval stands beneath the trees, his ax clutched in front of him. His eyes scan the roof and then the grounds closest to the cottage. He grunts and looks over at me.

"Stay inside," he growls. "I don't see anything, but I'm going to go around back just to make certain."

I nod and watch him walk away until he disappears around the side of the cottage. There's a loud moaning sound from a delfass, no doubt Garval's beast greeting him as he walked by the stable in the back. I don't hear anything else, no matter how hard I strain to listen. I nearly jump out of my skin when Garval appears once again at my side, his expression disgruntled.

"Nothing. There are some signs of disturbance in the growth, but there are workers out working in the orchards," he grumbles. "We should go back inside."

He suddenly stiffens as large body breaks through the trees carrying an ax. The ash-colored orc smiles widely and raises his hand in greeting.

"What are you doing here, Fellek?" Garval rumbles unhappily.

The male lowers his ax and swipes his forearm against his brow. The look he gives Garval is less than friendly but must pass for politeness among orcs since the male beside me doesn't lose his shit. Bodi would have, but then having another unrelated male this close to me seems to rub him wrong anyway.

"Hired on with the team," Fellek answers in a bored voice. "We are nearly finished, and I happened to see the human outside and wished to extend my greeting." His smile returns as he looks over at me. "Good day," he purrs.

"Hi," I reply flatly, not at all succumbing to that rolling sound. It works coming from Bodi, but from anyone else it apparently makes my skin crawl.

Garval bares his teeth, his impressive tusks jutting out more ferociously. "Be respectful. This is my brother's intended mate."

Fellek's brows raise, his expression growing wicked. "Is she now? I can't imagine what she would see in that pompous warrior. If you are looking to mate an orc, little female, I would be happy to apply."

Garval's growl deepens angrily. "You would dare! Perhaps it was you sneaking around here looking to steal her for your own with the mating not yet completed!"

The thought alarms me because I sure as hell don't want any orc getting it into his head to try and take me. I didn't even know that was a risk. I want this mating business done with. I also recognize a need to defuse the situation. Garval looks ready to murder the male who really hasn't done anything worse than flirt, even if I'm offended by his offer.

I grip Garval's arm tightly with one hand and glare at the other male. "No thank you. I have every intention of mating Bodi."

There's a lot more I want to say, such as pointing out that making that offer while I'm clearly here by choice is rude as fuck, but I exercise some self-restraint and keep things on point. Regardless, the male's smile slips away, and he stiffens slightly, but his reluctant nod assures me that there isn't about to be any kind of scene.

"Very well. If that's your choice. I will return to my work. We will likely be gone within the hour."

Garval remains tense beside me as Fellek stalks back into the orchard, and in the next moment he's herding me back inside the cottage as he grumbles under his breath.

"I can't believe that guy!" I burst out the moment the door shuts behind us. "Did he think he could just get me to leave Bodi like that?"

He grunts unhappily. "It's been known to happen. Until a mating has been finalized, a female can be lured away or stolen away without anything that can be done about it if the female decides to remain with the other male. It is one reason why Bodi asked me to wait here with you to guard you in his absence. Until you are mated, leaving you is going to be very difficult for him."

"Shit," I breathe, and he nods solemnly.

"I will have to inform Bodi of this transgression," he warns. "He told me of the male approaching you before. He will wish to deal with this matter personally."

I sigh. "He's not going to try to kill him or anything, right?"

Garval's responding chuckle is dark and humorless. "He will make the male wish he had. It is the highest disrespect, and no one would object to him defending his position as your guard."

I frown at the strange wording choice. Again, guard seems to be used in a way beyond the strictest sense.

"What exactly does that mean? Is there something more than him just volunteering to protect me?"

Garval smiles sheepishly. "Technically, when he volunteered to guard you that is what he was, but by his actions he was demonstrating as your guard. This term is something specific among orcs. It means that he is courting you with the intent of eventually mating. It warns other males that he will act aggressively toward any attempts from males to lure you." His expression suddenly pinches into a scowl. "Fellek knows that Bodi will consider this contact to be the ultimate challenge, especially since he was absent when the male approached you."

I blow out a breath. "Well, no helping it now if that male was an idiot. How about we get back to baking? I have a scone recipe I'd like to try if you're game."

Just like that, the big orc relaxes and nods. "I would like that. This baking is very enjoyable. A much better way to pass the day than fighting."

Catching his wistful tone, my heart melts for the big lug. I know better than some about wanting a different sort of life so badly that you can taste it. I see that in Garval now as his smile drops at the reminder of his duties. If he wants to bake, he should, damn it!

I bump my shoulder against his arm. "Honestly, I should just let you do all of this. You're clearly the superior baker."

He gives me a stunned look. "You would consider that?"

I recall the way he quickly and delicately fashioned the perfect little pinwheels for the cinnamon rolls and find myself warming up to the idea. Why not have an orc as my baker? He would obviously have a good idea of things that might sell better among the villagers while we do special things targeted at humans when they visit. That would be more than a simple employee; that would require a huge investment of himself, his dedication and his time.

“Absolutely. In fact, I think we would be great partners if you’re interested.”

The smile that lights up his face is so full of hope that it makes me want to cry.

“I would be more than delighted. It would be a dream come true! Thank you,” he growls as he scoops me up into his arms and hugs me tight.

That’s what Bodi sees as he enters the cottage, and he lunges for his brother with a snarl. I squeak in surprise, and Garval immediately drops me to counter his brother’s attack. It takes a few rather tense minutes of talking my mate down so he doesn’t try to kill his brother, but eventually they part, and my mate is grabbing me up in his arms with an aggressive snarl. Tensions run high for another twenty minutes or so, but he soon shifts from anger to intrigue as we explain our idea.

To my surprise, he not only agrees with our plan but insists that we celebrate as he pulls out some orcish whiskey that makes my eyes sting.

The good cheer doesn’t last long, however, because then Garval informs him of Fellek’s presence, and I find myself caged in my mate’s arms all over again as he growls and snarls like an angry cat. So much so that even Casper, who has clung to Bodi since we moved in, bolts for cover. Garval, clearly seeing the wisdom of making a hasty exit, excuses himself, leaving us alone as my mate’s arms tighten.

“You are *my mate*. He will not have you. No one else will have you.”

“I agree,” I soothe, my hands running up into his long hair, massaging his scalp.

His growl turns into a purr, and then my ass is rapidly hauled into the bedroom. His lovemaking feels as if he is marking me as his with every nip of his teeth and stroke of his tongue bathing my skin. When his cock pushes into me, it feels as if he’s trying to implant himself permanently as he growls into my ear. His clawed fingers grip me just hard enough to sting without hurting as he ruts me into oblivion, words of devotion somehow managing to fall off his lips in between growling gasps for air. There are some threats mingled in there about killing any male who dares to try and take me, but as far as I’m concerned that’s orc love language.

How could I ever doubt that we were meant to be?

CHAPTER 24



The day has finally come. My future feels so much different on this day than I would have imagined it just a few months ago. I met my mate during the apple harvest in the time that she calls mid-August in her human calendar, and now it is finally the equinox, and the Lantern Labyrinth awaits us. As much as I look forward to walking the dark labyrinth with my mate, even more so than I had when I initially asked her many weeks ago, I am even more eager for our mating feast that will be following directly afterward.

The labyrinth is some distance from the village, resting at roughly the midway point between our village and the southeastern forest border that we share with a small goblin kingdom. It is a sacred place for both us and the goblins, and one of the few times of the year that goblins and orcs socialize and celebrate.

The distance, of course, means that we are riding Haith. Lynn has never ridden double on him, since we hadn't yet made it out from the cottage, but my mate is as adventurous as ever, to my delight. The fact that she's bonded with Haith makes it easier. The delfass follows her around as if he were Casper, his big head butting her affectionately at every opportunity. I worried at first that he would throw her off her feet and hurt her, but Lynn assured me that he was fine so I didn't put a halt to his silliness. I'm rather glad that, after our passion was spent last night, Lynn was happy that I arranged our mating feast so early. I was surprised to find out that Garval had spoken to her a little of the matter, and now I have to be grateful for his actions on my behalf. It's because of him that I have my mate in my arms, anticipating our mating as she sits in front of me on Haith's back as the delfass picks his way over the rocky terrain.

The Lantern Labyrinth is the perfect way to truly begin our life together as a mated pair. There is just one potential negative—my family. Lynn hasn't been exposed much to them outside of Garval, and him I never had to worry about because he doesn't make a nuisance of himself. I'm more concerned about my twin, Erra, and... my mother.

My mother will be all too delighted to discover that I'm not only mating Lynn, but that I've found my bloodbound, and that is exactly what worries me. She is not the most subtle or gentle. The last thing I need is for my family scaring Lynn back to Ov'Ge. Not that I wouldn't go and fetch her—because she's mine, after all—but it would be an onerous task.

I steal a glance down at Lynn and smile. She looks so happy, wearing a dress that she had bought at the market should she need something for a special occasion. She's told me in every way possible that she's looking forward to tonight, and that fills me with an indescribable joy. That she's had some warning for what's to come seems to have fueled her own excitement, which is a bit strange to me. An orc female would expect a big showing and the ceremony ready when a male invited her to be his bonded mate. Garval somehow anticipated that she needed to be prepared. I don't know how he knew it, but I am pleased he did.

"Tell me about this Lantern Festival," Lynn says, snuggling back into my chest.

The corners of my mouth rise at her genuine interest. How refreshing to find humans who are truly interested in orcs. I'm even more pleased that my mate is interested in our culture and not just focused solely on the bond with me.

"The first thing you must know," I say, hugging her against me as I warm up to the subject, "is that it is perhaps one of the most important celebrations of the autumn for our village. The labyrinth is built above ground, but that doesn't make it any easier to traverse, especially since we do not enter with our lanterns until the sun begins to go down. The lanterns represent the souls searching for the slain lord of the light and life, Apunial. We celebrate the cycle of life, that everything lives and eventually returns the darkness before returning to us again."

"Sounds lovely," she murmurs. "What's the second thing one must know?"

I grin. "Not to get lost."

My answer surprises a laugh out of her, and she elbows me in the gut, making me chuckle. I love knowing that I have this kind of power. Although she has beautiful faint lines around her eyes that tell me that she loves to smile and laugh, I have a feeling that she doesn't do it much. My female needs to laugh more, and I'll be happy to be the one to give that to

her, just as I will give her all the joy and pleasure she could possibly want, too.

The sun is sinking low by the time we arrive at the labyrinth, the perimeter completely surrounded by lit torches, their light bouncing off the stone walls jutting into the sky. The sight kindles a deep feeling within the heart for all orcs who see it, myself included. It is a reminder to our clan of those generations who built it with their own hands who've gone before. It is a sacred thing, so much so that even in our past skirmishes with other clans and fae, no one has sought out to fell it, bloody its walls, or even scar its sides with weapons. Just seeing it fills me with a certain peace and affinity with my ancestors, and I'm glad to be sharing this with my mate. She will be joining our family and clan and becoming a part of all of this.

I direct Haith to the far side of the labyrinth where there are tethering posts. Many are occupied with delfass, griffins with their hooked beaks and four-clawed paws, and the large six-legged mawu with their narrow muzzles that don't quite conceal the enormous teeth that remain in a perpetual grimace even when they are at rest. Farther away, there are slender white relhiern being tended to by a wood nymph.

"Oh, wow, those white deer are beautiful." My mate sits forward in my arms.

Of course she would find them pleasing to the eye. Few would disagree.

I nuzzle her but nod as I direct Haith to a nearby tethering post. "They are attractive animals, but also quite fierce if they need to protect their rider. Few among the wood elves and nymphs devote themselves to being warriors, preferring to hide away in their lush forests. A relhiern will help them escape an attack quickly and will defend them if necessary. It is for this reason that many prefer the company of the breed as their mount."

I draw her closer against me and tip my chin toward the fiercer creatures. "Keep a safe distance from those. They are goblin and troll mounts. Unlike our delfass, who are nearly like kin to us, or the mild-tempered relhiern, those beasts are difficult to control and of questionable temperament. If you are not their handler, they are not safe to be around."

Lynn shivers in my arms as one of the terrible fox beasts turns its head our way, its nostrils flaring. "Why would they even chance it then?"

I grin at the innocent question. “Some for the love of the beast, I’m sure. Others for love of the coin. Few manage to master the skills necessary, but those who do can charge a nice sum for their services.”

I lift a hand and gesture to a collection of carriages and carts some distance away to emphasize my point. As most orcs seem to prefer to ride their delfass rather than hitching them, most of the conveyances were brought by the other fae present.

Haith stops at the pole and waits as I slide off his back from behind Lynn. I immediately reach up and lift Lynn off, letting her body slide down mine before her feet touch the ground. My chest rumbles with pleasure at the contact, and her tiny gasp delights me, letting me know that she’s just as affected.

“This place is incredible,” she whispers as I walk around to tether Haith.

I nod. “I have seen this sight all my life, and it always speaks to me every time I return to it.”

Near the labyrinth entrance, there is a large bonfire that seems to be used for the fire source for everything, including the table filled with lanterns that sit up against the nearest wall. I can see the shadows of those slipping inside the labyrinth, each carrying their own bright lantern inside.

I’m eager to get inside with my mate. Although it is a spiritual journey for us, it is also a time of fun with mated couples and younglings playing along the paths. I intend to stalk my own mate through the labyrinth if she allows it. We haven’t had much opportunity to play, and though we are a fierce race, we do enjoy hunting games. It is a side of our species that my Lynn has not fully yet seen, beyond the glimpses during the harvest festival.

Eager to be on my way, I attach the cable extending from the post to Haith’s harness. It is long and thick and has a low shine to it in the firelight, as if it might be made of numerous tiny metal links that allow it to move effortlessly between my hands. Once Haith is secure, I stroke a hand over the delfass’s shoulders and give him a final pat before joining my mate once more.

Tipping my head toward her, I speak in a quiet voice. “Stay close to me when we enter. It is ridiculously easy to get lost in there. All it takes is one distraction and you could end up anywhere in the labyrinth.”

Lynn fidgets beside me. “No one will get hurt if they do... will they?”

My answering chuckle puts her at ease. “Not at all. It can be a bit frightening, and there are some startling figures carved throughout the labyrinth, but nothing that will hurt you. There are certain areas where it is safe for us to play little games. So it is not all of it that you have to be worried about.”

My Lynn sucks in her lips with barely contained excitement. “Okay, I can definitely do that. The labyrinth seems to be no more threatening than a good old-fashioned Haunted House.” She laughs softly. “Not that this place, all lit up like it is, doesn’t give me that vibe anyway.”

“Does it scare you?” I ask, concerned that maybe she would not be comfortable in there.

To my relief, she shakes her head. “Actually, quite the opposite. It’s amazing. Everything looks impossibly ancient, like something forbidden. Like we’re getting an opportunity to see something that few humans have ever witnessed for themselves. Naturally, there’s a risk of getting spooked, but that makes it all the more fun.”

I chuckle at her enthusiasm. “I believe you will be the second human to ever see it, so you are not wrong there. I am glad that you like it. I have been looking forward to sharing this with you.”

The labyrinth was special; it united those who walked along it together. It had been what I desperately hoped for when I invited Lynn to accompany me, and the fact that we are doing it as a mated pair instead supersedes everything I had hoped for then. We will be walking together, deepening our bond before we finally secure it and cement that link.

When we approach the entrance, an iron gray orc stationed there peers up at us with an icy blue gaze. Merkof, his face creased with age, seems to have been given the honored duty of lantern lighter this night. I’m pleased for him. As an elder male, he is no longer able to serve on the guard, though he has taken to leading the tours. I can see that he recognizes my Lynn from when he attempted to chase me from the tour because his eyes widen slightly.

I place my hand on Lynn’s back, visibly claiming her, and feel her skin shiver beneath my touch. The male quietly nods his greeting, and I see his lips tilt up in approval before he opens two of the lanterns set in front of him. Meticulously, he lights the wick on each one, kindling a brilliant flame to brighten the descending night.

With a grunt, I hand him a coin before plucking up both lamps, handing one to my mate.

“Hold on tight to your lamp. It will keep you from being lost between worlds,” I murmur teasingly with a waggle of my eyebrows.

Lynn snorts with amusement as she brings her lamp up against her side.

“Always you with the foolery, Bodi,” the older orc mutters, his lips twitching despite his obvious exasperation. “Go on then, if you are planning on entering, and keep an eye on the female you’re with,” he says, waving us in.

“My mate,” I clarify, making the male grin happily. I pause, hesitating at the entrance. “Has *she* arrived?”

He chuckles and nods again, his eyes crinkling with humor. “That she has. Your mother arrived with Erra just a short while ago.” He gives Lynn a speculative look. “She will be very curious about this, I would say.”

“She already knows,” I growl, hugging my mate to me.

Merkof chuckles. “Then I am certain that explains why she seemed eager for your arrival. She left me a message to tell you that she will be waiting for you at its heart.”

And that is exactly what I’ve been afraid of. Grumbling under my breath, I take Lynn’s hand in mine and lead my mate into the labyrinth.

CHAPTER 25



LYNN

The inside of the labyrinth is as I expected it would be and somehow more. The comparison to a haunted house wasn't entirely wrong. There's a light mist that clings to the ground now that the sun is nearly down, and a scatter of leaves over the cobble stone path scrape with the stirring of the wind when they aren't crunching beneath our feet. The shadows are also longer, with deep pits of darkness where a path branches and veers, and grimacing faces snarl from where they are carved in rock.

Sometimes a hand appears to stretch out with a clawed grasp or a hunched-over silhouette can be seen. The light from the lantern bounces off the sculpted figures, barely brightening some feature enough to startle me before it falls once again in shadow the moment we step away. My heart races, and I cling to Bodi, grateful that he's remained so close beside me. With the sharp angles of the path, everything is obscured until we are right on top of it. I would have been a lot more frightened alone.

"These remind us of the guardians of the underworld," Bodi whispers, gesturing to one of the terrible, half-illuminated faces. "They are fierce and menacing warriors, to protect those under their care and, though they are kind to the dead, prevent any of more rebellious souls from daring to leave their abode."

"It would certainly give me pause," I admit with a shaky laugh and my mate chuckles and flashes me a smile that's only just barely visible in the light of our lanterns.

We round a corner and then another. Although I can hear the soft murmur of voices of those in other parts of the labyrinth, but I don't see anyone anywhere. They are so soft and distant that it adds to the haunting atmosphere surrounding us.

I startle when we round the corner. The path appears to terminate at the enormous face carved from stone. It fills the space completely, stretching from one corner to the other, and matches the entire height of the wall, its mouth opened wide to expose a double set of tusks. With the mist curling around its horrible teeth, it appears to be living, the mist itself giving the

illusion of breath. Bodi tugs me toward it, and on closer inspection I can see there's a dark tunnel through its mouth.

"Not as pleasurable as being devoured by one's mate, but it seems it is time for us to be eaten," Bodi whispers, his breath fanning my face as the promise in his voice causes a wave of arousal to pitch through me out of nowhere.

"Fuck, not now. I can't think about sex in a place like this. That's just twisted," I retort with a little guilty laugh.

He chuckles, his hand releasing mine to stroke my ass for a moment before grasping my fingers in his once again.

"Incorrigible," I mumble, unable to even feign being put out. I squeeze his hand. "I thought this is supposed to be such a venerated place."

He shrugs unrepentantly. "The ancestors enjoy fucking too. They will understand."

I snicker quietly at that, because I can certainly appreciate that perspective, and let him walk with me through the statue's gaping mouth.

Although it's just as dark in this part of the labyrinth, there seems to be fewer twists in our path as we make our way further into the labyrinth, and the frightening statues have dialed back to something more hauntingly beautiful. Silhouettes of lovers and children playing, as well as those of couples embracing. It is still more shadows than anything, but I feel suddenly less afraid and more in complete wonder.

Bodi tucks his big body close to mine and whispers. "Are you ready to play a game, my mate?"

A shiver runs over me. "What game would that be?"

"The divine hunt. It is said that our families wait for us, especially a mate who has passed, so that we can be reunited with them when we walk the shadow roads to the underworld. This part of the labyrinth is the memory dance, speaking to the heart of those who come down it, reminding us that the joys of the living are likewise received by the dead. It is like a promise that eludes our grasp," he rasps.

Exhilaration and a needy excitement fill me at the idea of being hunted through this part of the labyrinth. I won't even ask if it's safe because he's already said as much. And he wants this as much as I do. I can tell from the sound of his harsh breathing and the tension in the muscles of his body from where he's pressed up behind me.

I want this divine hunt. I want to be pursued and captured by the one male I want and need.

“How do we start?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

He squeezes my hand and then let’s go as he steps back into the shadows. Only his lamp provides some view of his face. The grin he gives me is sensuous.

“Run,” he growls.

With a gasped laugh, I spin around and sprint into the darkness ahead of me. Satyrs seem to bound all around me from the half-concealed sculptures and there is a sense of merriment as I increase my speed.

I can hear him pursuing me and the rasp of his breath filling the air. His feet pound up the path as I dip along one turn and then the next, not wanting to make this easy. It is frightfully easy to get turned around, but I don’t let myself dwell on it. This is a game. It’s fun! And as tempting as it is to just let Bodi find and claim me, I find that I’m enjoying this far too much.

There is a rustle of leaves to my left, and I let out a shout of surprise that he managed to find another route that cut directly to me. I giggle and begin to sprint forward in one last bid to make him work for it, but I don’t go more than a few feet until a pair of thick arms surround me and lift me off my feet. I gasp as the masculine scent fills my nose and then freeze.

This is all wrong. It’s not Bodi!

A scream rips from me as I thrash, my lantern falling from my hand to clank against the ground at my feet. The arms wrapped around me tighten further as I’m pulled back in along a narrow, dark trail. Leaves and bare branches scrape over me as I’m pulled through.

“Quiet!” he snarls.

Yeah, not going to happen. Bodi is looking for me, and I’m not going to make it easier for this male to take me. Clawing at the arm holding, I snap my head back hard enough to nail him in the chin and scream for all I’m worth.

My captor curses and then I hear it, an enraged bellow echoing through the labyrinth. The arms banding around me tighten painfully as he hauls me down the path. He’s picked up his pace now, flat out running the best he can with me wriggling and shrieking in his arms. I refuse to slow my attempt to escape for even a moment. My flailing is slowing him down,

and my screaming, though it's starting make my throat raw, will help Bodi find me. I know it will!

My scream stops suddenly when I'm thrown against a wall, my breath escaping my lungs in a giant whoosh of air that leaves me struggling to breathe. An angry face snarls up at me as he fumbles with something at his side. I can't really see what it is he has because there is the only a faint light in the sky. Even his features are mostly concealed from me that I can't tell who has me, other than knowing that it is an orc.

"Cursed human," he snarls, his voice low and guttural with a savage fury.

He lifts his hand, and the faint light glints off a blade. Terror freezes my blood and makes my heart feel like its slowing when a loud bellow tears through the air. The orc startles and draws his arm high, preparing to stab me, when a larger shadow hits him from the side, tearing the male off of me.

Although there is a scuffle of violence, I can't see much other than a pair of shadowy silhouettes scrabbling against each other, trading blows. Distantly, I can hear the rush of other feet pounding as others traverse the labyrinth. With one last roar, my captor is slammed against the floor.

Someone turns the corner, the illumination from a lantern spilling over us. Bodi rises to his feet, blood seeping from long gashes drawn across his arm and chest. His green eyes meet mine, burning with fury. His brow puckers with concern, and he leaves the male there to make his way over to me. His large hands stroke my face.

"Are you okay, lanara?" he asks worriedly.

I nod, my hands gripping his forearms, holding him tight to me. "Yes. Thank fuck. I'm fine... I'm so glad you're here," I whisper, my voice choking.

He leans in, brushing his forehead against mine. "I have you, my Lynn. No one will ever harm you again."

"Who is it?" a voice quietly asks.

The one holding the lantern grunts. "Fellek, the dumb bastard. He's lucky that Bodi didn't kill him. Attacking the mate of an Ironclaw is suicide." He sighs, gesturing to two tall shadows behind him. "Come on. We will need to restrain him and drag him to the cells at the keep."

The shadows step forward, arms reaching down and picking up the unconscious Fellek. His feet drag on the ground as they haul him away. I

don't bother to watch any further. Bodi is the only one who matters. I wish I had better eyesight so that I could see him better, but that doesn't matter. All that matters is that he's holding me, his big hand stroking my cheek.

"What is going on?" a sharp voice cracks, and my mate tenses.

"Not now," he growls.

"Do not growl at me—and give her some space to breathe. No one likes a hovering male."

I grab ahold of Bodi's wrist so that he can't move, and I feel his smile as he relaxes against my grip.

"Actually, as it happens, I enjoy it very much. He can hover over me and carry me around attached to his chest if he wants. Considering that he's mine and I'm the one being hovered over, I think that's my call to make," I snap.

The female sniffs and comes into the light, her thick arms crossing over her chest.

"You think that gives you some authority among his family, do you?" she challenges, her eyes narrowing.

"Who the hell is this?" I whisper furiously to my mate.

His lips brush my cheek, and he mutters something that sounds distinctly unflattering under his breath that's too low for me to catch.

"My mother," he grumbles.

Oh. I see.

Craning my neck, I meet the female's gaze. "Considering that I'm his mate, yes I do."

Her rigid expression suddenly cracks, and she grins in delight.

"Good. That's exactly how it should be." She glances at Bodi. "Well, you heard her. Pick her up and let's get to the center. There is a mating feast waiting."

"Mother, my mate was just attacked," Bodi growls in protest as he scoops me up into his arms. "She should rest."

I laugh at the absurdity of everything and flatten my hand against his chest. "You're the one who's hurt not me."

He glances down at his arm and grunts. "Just a scratch. It will be fine."

"Uh-huh. Well then, I'm fine too." I stretch up a bit to plant a kiss on his mouth. "And I would much rather enjoy being with my mate and attending our mating feast than giving that asshole the satisfaction of ruining things."

He meets my eyes, his expression thoughtful. “You would, truly?”

His mother snorts as she strides toward us with her lantern. Although not as tall as her son, she’s still imposing when it comes to human standards. “Any mate of yours would have the spirit of a warrior to survive being mated to you. Of course she would.”

She meets my eyes though and I can see a fond amusement in them even when she rolls them in exasperation at Bodi’s huff of defiance. I share a knowing smile with the stern-looking female as I wrap my arms around my mate’s neck and hug him tight.

It may take a stubborn and strong female to love Bodi, and I have a feeling that his mother knows this from experience. That’s okay—because I’m the perfect one for the job. He’s my double shot latte on any day of the week.

CHAPTER 26



LYNN

It doesn't take us long to get to the center of the labyrinth, and as we're surrounded by so many members of his clan it's a noisy affair. Erra, his sister, shouts over the clamor to introduce me to her child running out ahead of her while Garval and another male that I think I recognize from the tavern, trailing after her. No one seems to be in a terrible hurry, and despite the attack, spirits are high as we complete the final winding steps together.

As the path enters the most central part, I'm momentarily blinded by the torches set up. When my vision clears, I'm in awe of the beauty of the place.

Beautiful sculptures rise at various points of the perimeter, males and females outfitted in armor standing guard, their carved faces relaxed and smiling down on their descendants. Beneath those statues, tables are set up around a central firepit where something is being roasted. There are so many orcs packed in there that I'm sure that a number of the clan has to be present. I gawk a little when I see Orgath and his mate seated among those assembled, their smiles welcoming as we arrive.

My fingers dig into Bodi's shoulder. "You didn't tell me your chieftain would be here!" I whisper.

"He is my cousin. Of course Orgath wouldn't miss my mating." He chuckles. "I think he's been looking forward to it almost as much as I have, just to know that I will have a female looking after me so I will not be tempted to do anything too risky."

"I could see that," I retort, trying not to laugh.

My mate is absolutely the type to fly by the seat of his pants and go with his gut instinct. I can only imagine that his family has some stories to tell about him, with the way they all seem to regard him as a troublemaker.

As we make ourselves comfortable in the spots reserved for us at the table, Erra raises her goblet with a broad grin.

"As the first mated between me and my twin, I am happy to see he has found a female willing to tolerate his ass so that he is no longer tempting war by his foolish courting efforts. Congratulations to Bodi... and Lynn,

you have my deepest sympathies. To the couple!” she shouts, her salute echoed by those gathered as they too lift their cups.

I lift an eyebrow at my mate, and Bodi leans forward to whisper in my ear. “I can explain that. She’s exaggerating.”

“I’m sure,” I murmur around a quiet laugh.

Garval stands, his larger frame making him stand out among his kin. His goblet raises to us. “I like Lynn too much to wish her on my brother, but since it has happened, I’m pleased that she’s joining our family and clan. To the couple,” he growls, and is joined also by a laughing chorus.

“Backstabber,” Bodi grumbles, laughing when I elbow him in the stomach.

The elderly female in a long sapphire robe that was introduced as his mother smirks over the crowd, her own cup raised. “I love my Bodi and wish him all the happiness with his new mate.” She pauses. “It takes a strong female—a very, very strong female to put up with his antics, which I can see that she is. She has good heart and character to love him as he is. But for all his silliness, Bodi will love her with everything he has and will always be a good mate. This is how I know they will have a blessed mating. To Bodi and Lynn!”

Bodi feeds me tidbits of food and offers me sips of cider intermittently as the celebration goes on. Every now and then, he groans, his arms tightening around me while the members of his clan who have known him from youth stand to offer their congratulations with anecdotes about his days as a juvenile or his early attempts to find a mate. My mate grumbles at each one, but his eyes shine with humor, and he nods in thanks to each of them in turn. I suspect this is normal for a mating feast, and I’m both glad and a little sad that I don’t have anyone present to tell embarrassing stories about me. My family and I don’t really talk. Kassie is the only friend I have anymore, and she’s dealing with her own problems, so it’s probably for the best.

Everyone goes silent when the chieftain stands, a wide smile on his face replacing the amused look he’s been wearing for most of the evening. He raises his goblet, his eyes warm with obvious affection as he looks over at us.

“No one is more pleased than I to see my cousin mated. I have been present to hear some of the worst flirting in our years together only to watch him try again, despite repeated failures. And there have been a lot,”

he adds amid chuckles rising from the clan. A fondness fills his expression. "Few know that in recent years Bodi ceased such efforts, hoping for the one female who would be his bloodbonded mate to come to him, much as I have found my Sammi." He reaches down for his mate's hand and squeezes it. "It brings joy to my heart to know that he has found her at last—and without her attempting to maim him."

"I did puke on him, though," I offer, which rouses some laughter.

"And you stabbed me with a fork," Bodi reminds me, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Well, minimal maiming," Orgath corrects with a booming laugh. "My deepest congratulations. Now that you've fed your mate by your hand and cup, I hope you are now ready to indulge us by presenting the collar."

A murmur of agreement sweeps the crowd, and my mate actually blushes, his gray-blue cheeks reddening. Then Bodi withdraws two pouches from his pocket and clears his throat in a gruff manner that I find absolutely adorable.

"It is tradition for a male to present his female with a gift for their mating. I'm not particularly talented at much other than fighting, but I procured this for you." He withdraws a golden vial filled with a glittering gold substance that swirls around the glass containing it as if alive.

Erra leans forward in fascination. "Is that what I think it is?" she demands and then shoots a glare at her mate when he tries to shush her. "Why didn't you get me pixie dust? I can't believe my own twin upstaged my mate," she groans.

Bodi's lips quirk, but he ignores her as he places the vial in my hand.

"It's very pretty," I whisper, "but I have no idea what it's for."

"I will show you when we are alone," he whispers back with such a wicked look that I instinctively curl my fingers around the gift with excitement.

"Thank you," I say loudly. "I absolutely love this gift."

"I bet she does. I would too. Screaming with pleasure, in fact," another female says which brings another round of laughter that makes my own skin blush with the innuendo.

I turn my attention back to my mate, who's watching with fond amusement. He then opens a second pouch and pours from it into his palm a beautiful necklace filled with polished pink gems and intricately carved claws. This has to be the collar because its design is common with what I

see the other mated females wearing. Each one raises a hand her to throat, stroking over the stones with approving smiles as if they're remembering their own mating ceremonies. Emotion chokes me, and I blink back tears as I watch the torchlight dance over the collar.

"Will you accept my collar and so accept me as your mate?" he says quietly.

I nod, unable to trust myself to speak as he lifts it up and clasps it around my neck. The silence that had descended shatters with loud cheers.

"Wait, what of the tattoos and piercing?" his mother calls out. "They must be done."

"Only if my mate wishes it," my mate contests, his voice lowering into a snarl. "She is human and doesn't have to follow every one of our traditions." So saying, he glances over at me, leaving the decision completely in my hands.

I look at the mated pairs, noting their matching tattoos and septum piercings. It's not a look I would have ever just chosen for myself, but somehow it just feels appropriate.

"Okay..." I say slowly and nearly jump when an elder female sitting beside his mother hops up and stomps over toward me.

Carrying a kit in one hand and shrouded in plain black attire, she squints at me as she nears, her nostrils flaring. She doesn't appear much older than Bodi's mother but has obviously forgone some of the more fashionable trends to settle for bold tattoos and simple clothing. Suddenly she stops and steps back.

"This one is whelping. Human bodies are delicate. Better to wait," she announces gruffly with a nod in my direction. "Congratulations," she growls before stalking away again to retake her seat.

I stare after her, my mouth hanging open. His mother stares back at me, stunned before she grins and claps her hands.

"Our line is strong," she boasts. "Orgath, my sister's son, got orclings on his mate quickly and has many progeny, and now my son only has his mate a few days and has already managed to sire young. Our family will be blessed with many orclings!"

The clan cheers and I lean toward Bodi. "I hope she isn't expecting us to just crank them out because I'm kinda good with just one or two."

He laughs and hugs me gently against him, his warmth surrounding me. Several males come by to slap him on the back, and several couples

offer their congratulations as the evening wears on. Still, the feasting continues all around us, leaving us in our own little world.

Eventually, tables are pushed to the sides and drums are brought out along with a few other instruments I don't recognize, but before long everyone is dancing steps that I can't hope to follow. That doesn't stop Bodi from dragging me out among them, his body moving with mine as he attempts to teach me the dance until we're clinging to each other with laughter.

It's in that moment, pressed up against him, that he ducks his head and inhales, a low rumble rising through him that sparks my own arousal. I grind against him, subtly unable to resist, lust burning through me.

His breath is hot on my skin as his voice rasps near my ear. "I can't wait until we get home to have you. Follow me now, lanara."

I silently nod and allow myself to be drawn down a dark path by my mate. The light wanes the farther we get from the torches, and the roar of the celebration dims. He doesn't go so far that I'm blind, but he somehow finds a bench and lowers me upon it. His fingers hot on my skin, he slowly strips me, his hands stroking every inch of exposed skin. Only once I'm naked does he undress too, and I can see the large shadow of his cock bobbing as it is freed from his pants.

I lick my lips as my arousal surges higher, and Bodi growls deep in his chest. That sound pierces right through me, and it feels as if we're being swept up in a single tide of energy. He stands before me, not moving an inch, and his hands beckon me.

"If you wish this mating, you need to take it, my Lynn," he growls.

I lick my lips. "Sit down then, Bodi."

He complies, his ass hitting the bench with a solid sound that makes me wince with sympathy. That had to sting, even though he doesn't make even the smallest sound of complaint. His glowing eyes are focused entirely on me, tracking my every movement as I walk nearer and slowly sink down in front of his knees.

"Finally, I get my turn," I tease before swiping my tongue up the thick length of his shaft.

Bodi inhales sharply, the growling sound picking up as he clenches his hands at his side. He's struggling to let me remain in charge. I wonder if I can break that control.

I take the tip in my mouth, my tongue swirling playfully around his piercing before sucking him deep. I play like this, tormenting him, releasing him every so often to leisurely lick along his length until the tip beads with precum and his breath stutters out of his lungs. He endures it well, but I hear the loud, grinding scrape of his claws against the wood of the bench that makes me smile around the flesh sucked into my mouth.

I give the pierced head one last flick of my tongue before I allow his cock to pop out of my mouth, my tongue teasing the slit until my mate snarls with desperation. When I finally rise up from my knees, his eyes are overbright with need. My lips tip into a smile.

“Still with me?”

His nod is jerky, and his large body trembles in front of me.

“I need you, lanara, my Lynn, to ease this fire in my blood,” he rasps.

“I do too,” I admit as I climb up into his lap, my knees settling onto the bench on either side of him.

I feel his big hands come up behind me, supporting my ass, but he does nothing more as I reach between us to position his cock against my super slick opening and press down. A shiver runs up my spine as I continue to lower myself until he’s completely sheathed. He shudders, and then I begin to rock, taking my pleasure and giving to him as I stroke my hands through his hair and grip the coarse strands. He growls beneath me, his hips moving involuntarily with me until the tightening within me unfurls with a powerful snap. I cry out and drop against his chest, my limbs quivering as my channel pulses, squeezing his sex with hard pulls. Bodi growls, and his hands beneath squeezing my ass and then gripping my bottom, pumping me up and down along his length so I can ride out my orgasm until I’m panting and gasping into his chest.

I don’t expect it at all when he suddenly withdraws and flips me on the wide bench. My feet braced on the ground on either side, I hold my body up with my elbows curled beneath me against the wood. I can feel the furrows that Bodi’s claws dug, and it excites me further, but no more so than the feel of his large body curling over mine, pressing his chest along my back. His cock brushes my folds for a moment before he’s diving in with one deep thrust that makes us both cry out.

He rocks against me, his cock plunging in and out of me as his hips hit my ass with every thrust. I dig my fingernails into the bench and cry out, feeling something strange rising within me, something more powerful than

any orgasm I've ever experienced. It's like a living thing spinning between us, tightening incrementally as our bodies slam together. I feel something hot and wet streak down my ass, brushed on by his fingertips, and an intense heat like I've never known spears through me. Whatever Bodi put on me I know he also put on himself because he moans loudly, his hips twitching as his thrusts quicken in a desperate rut that has me whimpering beneath him, begging for more.

My breath feels like it's about to seize within my lungs, my body swaying to meet his brutal rut. Bodi's growl thickens as he grinds deeper, his rhythm going all to hell. His cock swells and stiffens as his pace picks up in a wild crescendo of need that sends us both off the edge.

My cry of ecstasy is completely unfettered but soon drowned out by his roar as his seed spurts deep into me with every savage thrust. His arms drag me up off the bench so he can grind deeper, triggering another orgasm while his cock continues to twitch and release against the mouth of my womb. Apparent from the remnants of the orgasm rippling through me, I'm surprised when I feel a warm connection between us, drawing us together, merging us together so I can feel his presence resting right under my skin.

"My bloodbonded mate," he whispers, his voice choked with emotion and awe. "I knew it."

He cuddles me close, and I smile, snuggling into him. I should probably be embarrassed. There's some part of me that acknowledges that. Half the clan probably heard us fucking in the labyrinth. Hell, someone might have even seen us. But as I recline in my mate's arms, his cock slowly slipping from my body, I decide that I just don't give a fuck.

I've found my happily ever after, have a baby on the way and a mate who adores me, and didn't have to give up my coffee. Life can't get any better than this.

CHAPTER 27



I enter the cell, glaring at the male shackled there. He returns my stare, hatred in his eyes as he watches me approach. I do not speak at first; my rage is still very great. Despite spending a week with my mate at our cottage, enjoying newly mated bliss, I can't forget that this male had tried to end her life. He nearly succeeded in extinguishing that bright spark and taking her away from me.

There is no being I could possibly hate more than this male.

"Are you here to kill me then?" he snarls. "Get it over with if you are."

I stop in front of him and take his measure. A fanatic, eager to give his life for his cause. I don't need to have any special insights to see the signs.

"Oh, I will be, but first you will talk," I assure him.

His gaze turns wary. "Of what?"

"I want to know why you tried to kill my mate. Was it because she spurned you?" I inquire softly.

He lets out a disdainful bark of laughter that surprises me, though I don't show it. Lynn will never realize that as the captain of the guard, I have many terrible responsibilities that require me to be in complete control and sometimes do horrendous things. I may wear a smiling face, but I have honed my lethal instinct in a way that would make my father and grandfather proud. But only for protecting my clan. Nothing more. Yet this is one such thing that I do not want her ever to know of.

"I had no interest in touching your mate," he growls, his smile sharp with loathing. "I merely tried to lure her from you to complete what was necessary. Their kind should not be here, should not be mingling and polluting our cultures with their ways, and they should not be diluting our bloodlines."

"I see," I murmur. "And did your fellow Bright Bloods assist you in this? Was such a task so difficult that you required assistance?"

His face darkens. "Of course not. They refused to help. When we heard that Orgath was hunting us out, they fled the clan's territory, afraid of being caught. Only I had the courage to stay because this is my clan and I wished to defend it."

“And you failed,” I say, drawing out my blade at my side.

He grunts unhappily. “Perhaps I did, but I am only one. Not everyone will fail in seeing the humans expunged from our world.”

I glance over to a corner where Orgath waits in the shadows. He nods his head.

“Then it seems we must send a message,” I murmur.

Whirling, my blade slices through the air, neatly severing the muscles in his neck. His eyes widen and he gasps, gurgling on the blood spilling from his mouth and throat. Dispassionately, I look him in the eye as I walk closer, my hand knotting in his hair as I yank his head back, spilling even more blood from the wound.

“You will not walk Ov’Gorg again to be a threat to my mate or any of the mates to this clan,” I promise, and then let his head go to watch the life drain from him and the light extinguish from his eyes.

Pulling a cloth from my bag, I wipe down my blade and return it to its sheath as I turn and walk back to Orgath.

“We will have to alert the clans and neighboring territories. There’s no telling where the Bright Bloods fled,” I whisper.

My cousin nods solemnly. “We will. Now leave, Bodi. Return to your mate. I appreciate you seeing to this, but you are not supposed to be here.”

I stiffen in protest.

“I had to assure my mate’s safety,” I growl.

“And this is why I permitted it. It has been done. Now go home,” he chides.

I grunt in acknowledgment and leave. He is right. I’m so eager to return to my female. I know she is busy with Garval at our cottage, making plans for their café they’ve decided to name The Spiced Pumpkin. I’m not so secretly delighted. My mate is happy, and my brother is as well, having just terminated his position with the guard.

Life seems to be moving in the right direction finally, and I can’t wait to once more hold my bloodbonded mate in my arms.

EPILOGUE



ONE YEAR LATER

LYNN

I rub my hand over my belly. My little one has been growing quick as of late, almost as quick as my business. The Spiced Pumpkin is a success, more than I had expected it would be. It's almost too much to handle alone, even with Bodi baking in the kitchen. I really need help, especially with the little monster coming. It seems that I'm destined to go the entire typical fourteen-month pregnancy, and I'm just dying.

At least I know my best friend will listen to my bitching and moaning. She doesn't know I'm pregnant yet, and I feel a bit bad that I've kept this secret from her. After the birth of her baby, things have been hard for her, and it just felt wrong to share that bit of my happiness too soon while she was still healing. I need to tell her soon, though, because this baby will be here this winter. At very least, I'm hoping she'll visit. I want her here if possible.

Shifting my weight uncomfortably, I drag the magic mirror over to me and activate it with the spell code for Kassie's mirror. It takes it a moment to connect cross-portal, but when it does, I can't help but to smile at the sight of my friend's face... but my smile drops when I note how stressed she looks. It doesn't take me long to pry about how things have been going with getting support from Jason—may twenty mawu chew on his ass—but I'm surprised when she agrees to take me up on the same offer I've made so many times over the last year.

"Oh, gods, I'm so glad!" I laugh. "I was just worrying that I was going to have to bribe someone to work for me. I swear I scare off potential staff."

To my delight, Kassie laughs, her posture visibly relaxing. I take a huge gulp of the coffee beside me and grin.

"Don't exaggerate. We both know you're fine once you have those first couple of cups in your system," she teases.

“Ah, but it’s getting them to stick around that long.” I sigh. Somehow, I actually made one of the juvenile orclings cry before she stormed out of the café. “Actually, I’m glad this came up because I’ve been needing to hire someone. The team is great, and Garval is a godssend in the kitchen, but I need more help.”

“Garval,” she says, her nose wrinkling slightly.

I wave a hand, not wanting her to get the wrong idea. I honestly don’t even know if she remembers meeting Bodi’s brother. “Nothing like that. I mean he can cook just fine, but he complains whenever I drag him away from what he would rather be doing. He’s my baker, confectioner, and maker of sublime pastries that I swear have made me gain ten pounds this month alone.”

“I didn’t know orcs did that,” she murmurs, her eyes widening.

I grin at her stunned reaction. “Oh, this one does, and he was a lucky find! I almost thought I was going to have to send some of his relatives off to find and kidnap a baker for me. Of course, now he says he’s being wasted whenever I ask him to roast a ham or fry eggs... and truthfully, he’s right.”

“Admitting a male is right...” she hums, her smile taunting as she reminds me of some of the arguments that I got into with Bodi back in the day.

Naturally, I give her a dirty look and flip her the bird, and she bursts into laughter.

“Okay, so tell me then why it’s such a godssend, and not just to get your baker orc off your back,” she teases.

My grin widens. Time to spill the beans. For the first time, I’m excited to see what her reaction will be. “I’m going to need someone with a firm head on her shoulders there to run things when I go on maternity leave in the winter.”

Her draw drops, and she gapes at me for two whole seconds before an excited squeal escapes her.

“You sly devil,” she laughs. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrug, still beaming. I don’t want to tell her why so I go with a not-quite lie that would have been the truth if not for the fact that everyone in the village sees me on a regular basis. It’s actually one of the reasons I haven’t told anyone in my family yet. “We were keeping it between us... you know, just in case. I’m not exactly twenty...”

“As if women in their forties aren’t having babies,” she scoffs.

“Well, just one for us. I’ve been cleared in good health by the healers here, but I think that will be perfect.”

“I’m really happy for you,” she says sincerely, and I feel like blubbering like a baby at the honest love and happiness I see in her eyes.

I blink my eyes a bit to keep the tears at bay, and my smile widens. “Anyway, enough about the monster growing under my belt. When are you coming?”

“Probably a couple of weeks,” she replies, her expression bright with excitement.

“I’m going to hold you to that!” I laugh.

When the mirror finally goes dark some time later, I can truly feel fully satisfied as I lean back in my chair. Kassie will be coming soon. I’ve missed her so much. I’ve become close friends with Erra and her brood, and even gotten to know Sammi, but no one can replace Kassie.

I’m still grinning when Bodi walks in behind me, his arms swooping around me in a loving embrace. His lips brush my cheek and drop down to my neck where he breathes me in.

“Did you have a good day, lanara?” he murmurs.

I nod and pat his arm. “Tiring, but very good.”

Leaning back against him, I tell him about my conversation with Kassie. My mate’s brow shoots up at the news that she finally accepted my invitation. He had been ready to kill something when I had finally told him how Jason treated Kassie and had threatened to go to Ov’Gorg with Garval to sort the matter out until I stopped him. The last thing people needed was to be afraid of raging orcs invading human cities—even if it was for a good cause. I reminded him that anything Kassie did had to be her decision, and that was the only thing that kept him from informing his brother.

“It will be perfect,” he rumbles happily. “Put the two of them together and they will work things out. She will be mated and happy before the autumn is out.”

“You are so sure of that, are you?” I tease, running my fingers through his hair.

He nods. “He’s an Ironclaw. He will get his female, protect her, and devote himself to her happiness. She will never realize what hit her.”

I hum doubtfully. “Not to burst your bubble, my love, but Garval is pretty shy. Do you really think he’ll approach her?”

“With a little direction, yes,” Bodi drawls, making me laugh. “I am quite knowledgeable in this area.”

“Uh-huh... I seem to recall me wanting to slap your smile off of your face more than a few times.”

“But I still won my mate,” he purrs, rubbing his nose against the side of my neck.

I sigh with pleasure, allowing myself to fully relax in his arms.

“That you did. We both won,” I agree softly.

A year of happy memories stretches behind my eyes, making me smile in my mate’s arms. This is what I’ve always wanted, what I’m looking forward to as the years pass. It’s what I want for Kassie too. The Spiced Pumpkin family is about to grow, and I couldn’t be more excited!

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed Bodi and Lynn's story as much as I loved writing them. This story was a long time in coming. I've been wanting to write Bodi's story since he first made an appearance with his sister Erra in *The Orc Wife*. Their father, being both a warrior and a scholar really shaped a lot of how we understand his character in that he's raised with a lot of tradition around him but also the rebellious need to circumvent it even, unlike his twin, as he follows down his father's footsteps as a warrior. He plays as a bit of a jokester on the surface, but I've always felt that there was something more to him that would make the perfect mate for the right woman. I just hadn't discovered my heroine or her story.

Then it came to me, since he is a bit of a lighthearted character, why not give his story, while possessing an air of mystery, a certain sweetness that can come with a harvest festival. In a way this book is more of a duet because it ties directly to the novella that follows, *Trick or Orc*, for autumnal enjoyment for the Halloween season!

As you can probably guess, *Trick or Orc* will reunite Garval and Kassie for a bit of Halloween fun and romance!

Coincidentally these books are coming out in October which has been dubbed on the internet as "Orctober". It works for me just fine! It may even start a new tradition.

As for the *Bright Bloods*; it seemed to me that the natural progression of things would include resistance in the fae world with humans suddenly becoming a large presence there, just as there are humans who are resistant

to fae in Ov'Ge. I touched on them briefly in this book but expect to see more of them!

SJ Sanders

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.J. Sanders is a writer of Science Fiction and Fantasy Romance. With a love of all things alien and monster she is fascinated with concepts of far off worlds, as well as the lore and legends of various cultures. When not writing, she loves reading, sculpting, painting and travel (especially to exotic destinations). Although born and raised in Alaska, she currently is a resident of Florida with her family.

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